

# Vexillography

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**Vexillography** is the art and practice of designing flags; it is allied with vexillology, the scholarly study of flags, but is not synonymous with that discipline.<sup>[1]</sup> A person who designs flags is a vexillographer.

## Contents

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### Background of flag design

### Principles of design

Basics

Color

Structure

Devices

Symbolism

### Prominent vexillographers

### Notes

## Background of flag design

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Flag designs exhibit a number of regularities, arising from a variety of practical concerns, historical circumstances, and cultural prescriptions that have shaped and continue to shape their evolution.

Vexillographers face the necessity for the design to be manufactured (and often mass-produced) into or onto a piece of cloth, which will subsequently be hoisted aloft in the outdoors to represent an organization, individual, idea, or group. In this respect, flag design departs considerably from logo design: logos are predominantly still images suitable for reading off a page, screen, or billboard; while flags are alternately draped and fluttering images - visible from a variety of distances and angles (including the reverse). The prevalence of simple bold colors and shapes in flag design attests to these practical issues.

Flag design has a history, and new designs often refer back to previous designs, effectively quoting, elaborating, or commenting upon them. Families of current flags may derive from a few common ancestors - as in the cases of the Pan-African colours, the Pan-Arab colors, the Pan-Slavic colors, the Nordic Cross flag and the Ottoman flag.

Certain cultures prescribe the proper design of their own flags, through heraldic or other authoritative systems. Prescription may be based on religious principles: see, for example, Islamic flags. Vexillographers have begun to articulate design principles, such as those jointly published by the North American Vexillological Association and the Flag Institute in their *Guiding Principles of Flag Design*.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Principles of design

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In 2006, the North American Vexillological Association published a booklet titled *Good Flag, Bad Flag* to aid those wishing to design or re-design a flag. The booklet lists five basic flag design principles which have become a standard reference in the vexillographer community.<sup>[3]</sup> In 2014, the North American Vexillological

Association, alongside the Flag Institute created an updated booklet titled *The Commission's Report on the Guiding Principles of Flag Design*, which addresses issues present in *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, and goes more in-depth on the ideas laid forth in the aforementioned booklet.<sup>[2]</sup> The guidelines in this booklet can be summarized as follows:

## Basics

1. Keep in mind the physics of a flag in flight when designing a flag
2. Simple designs are more easily remembered
3. Flags should have distinctive designs that separate them from others
4. Designs and trends should be avoided if there is a possibility that they can date quickly

## Color

1. Using fewer colors keeps designs simple and bold
2. Contrast is important; use light on dark and dark on light
3. Modern printing techniques have made more shades of color available than previously, and this can be used advantageously
4. Designs should make the edge of a flag be well-defined so as to not get visually lost in the background of where it is flying

## Structure

1. Charges are best placed in the canton, hoist, or center of a design as these are the most visually prominent areas
2. Flag designs are usually longer than they are tall
3. Having different designs on the obverse and reverse of a flag undermines recognition and increase cost of production

## Devices

1. A single device used in a prominent position ensures recognizability when the flag is in flight or at rest
2. When multiple devices are used, different background colors can be used to "anchor" the devices into the overall design
3. Devices should be stylized graphical representations as opposed to realistic renderings
4. Writing on flags is difficult to read in flight; Parade Banners and Military Colors are usually more rigid than normal flags, making text more commonplace on them
5. Charges with directionality traditionally face towards the hoist, or flagpole
6. Seals, coats of arms, or logos are usually too complex to be used effectively on a flag, although exceptions exist

## Symbolism

1. Symbols should be both distinct and representative
2. A flag should represent the totality of any given community as opposed to its individual parts

3. A flag should emphasize its own identity over higher-level groupings, otherwise distinctiveness is lost
4. Symbolism relating to other entities should only be used if there is a clear, direct relevance
5. Designers should avoid representing any particular reference in multiple ways, and instead try to make a single definitive reference

## Prominent vexillographers

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- Columbano Bordalo Pinheiro, designer of the flag of Portugal
- Luis and Sabino Arana, designers of the Ikurriña (the flag of the Basque Country)
- Graham Bartram, designer of the flag of Tristan da Cunha and others
- Manuel Belgrano, designer of the flag of Argentina
- Frederick 'Fred' Brownell, designer of the flags of South Africa and Namibia
- Ron Cobb, designer of the American Ecology Flag
- John Eisenmann, designer of the flag of the U.S. state of Ohio
- Mohamed Hamzah, designer of the flag of Malaya
- Quamrul Hassan, designer of the flag of Bangladesh
- Cederic Herbert, designer of the flag of the short-lived Zimbabwe Rhodesia
- Francis Hopkinson, generally acknowledged designer of the American flag
- Friedensreich Hundertwasser, designer of a koru flag, among others
- Susan K. Huhume, designer of the flag of Papua New Guinea
- Sharif Hussein, designer of the flag of the Arab Revolt
- James I of England, designer of the first flag of Great Britain
- Syed Amir-uddin Kedwaii, designer of the flag of Pakistan
- Lu Haodong, designer of the Blue Sky with a White Sun flag of the Republic of China
- Nicola Marschall, designer of the "Stars and Bars", the First National Flag of the Confederate States of America
- John McConnell, designer of a Flag of the Earth
- Fredrik Meltzer, designer of the flag of Norway
- Raimundo Teixeira Mendes, designer of the flag of Brazil
- William Porcher Miles, designer of the battle flag of the Confederate States of America
- Francisco de Miranda, designer of the flag of Venezuela, upon which the present flags of Colombia and Ecuador are based.
- Theodosia Okoh, designer of the flag of Ghana
- Christopher Pratt, designer of the flag of the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador
- Orren Randolph Smith, citizen of North Carolina who is co-credited as being the father of the "Stars and Bars" flag, along with Nicola Marschall.
- Whitney Smith, designer of the flag of Guyana and other flags
- George Stanley, designer of the flag of Canada
- Joaquín Suárez, designer of the flag of Uruguay
- Pingali Venkayya, designer of the flag of India
- Robert Watt, designer of the flag of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
- Oliver Wolcott, Jr., designer of the flag of the United States Customs Service
- Zeng Liansong, designer of the flag of the People's Republic of China
- İsmet Güney, designer of the flag of Cyprus
- Nguyen Huu Tien, designer of the flag of Vietnam

- Gilbert Baker, designer of the rainbow flag symbol of the LGBT Movement
- Alexander Baretich, designer of the Cascadian bioregional flag AKA Doug Flag
- Ralph Eugene Diffendorfer, co-designer of the Christian Flag
- Christopher Gadsden, designer of the Gadsden flag
- Monica Helms, designer of the Transgender pride flag
- Catherine Rebecca Murphy Winborne - the "Betsy Ross of the Confederacy" - also co-credited as the designer of the "Stars and Bars" flag
- Adolf Hitler, designer of the flag of Nazi Germany, the *Reichskriegsflagge* and his personal standard
- Betsy Ross, designer, according to legend, of the American flag during the American Revolution
- Theodore Sizer, designed of the flag of St. Louis
- Gerard Slevin, former Chief Herald of Ireland reputed to have helped design the flag of Europe.

## Notes

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1. Smith, Whitney. Flag Bulletin XL:202(2001).
  2. "Flag Design" ([https://www.flaginstitute.org/pdfs/Flag\\_Design\\_Commission\\_Report.pdf](https://www.flaginstitute.org/pdfs/Flag_Design_Commission_Report.pdf)) (PDF). North American Vexillological Association / Association nord-américaine de vexillologie. Retrieved 2016-08-21.
  3. "Good Flag, Bad Flag: How to Design a Great Flag" ([https://nava.org/digital-library/design/GFB\\_F\\_English.pdf](https://nava.org/digital-library/design/GFB_F_English.pdf)) (PDF). North American Vexillological Association / Association nord-américaine de vexillologie. Retrieved 2020-05-15.
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