

Flags in Context: A Discussion of Design, Genre, and Aesthetics

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A flag can be a thing of great beauty. (Figures 1–4). And the beauty of a flag, as a flag, is closely tied to its function as a supporter of identity and a tool of communication. But few vexillologists have tried to think carefully and systematically about the specific aesthetics of flag design. A major recent exception is Ted Kaye’s booklet *Good Flag, Bad Flag*.¹ Kaye’s work is tremendously important. It has elevated the discussion of design and encouraged the effort to design better, more beautiful, and more functional flags. That is all very good, and nothing I write here is meant to suggest otherwise.



Figure 1. *Flag of New Mexico* (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 2. Flag of St. Louis, Missouri (NAVA web site, www.nava.org; image by Peter Orenski)



Figure 3. Civil ensign of Luxembourg (Flags of the World/FOTW web site, www.fotw.net; image by António Martins & Mark Sensen)



Figure 4. NAVA 41 Flag (NAVA web site)

Nevertheless, we should also be skeptical. Can the principles of flag design really be reduced to a short set of abstract criteria? And even if they could, should they be? Is this the best way to pursue the necessary and welcome study of the aesthetics of flags?

Consider other forms of applied design. Take architecture, for example. Few serious architects would hold by a pamphlet just called *Good Building, Bad Building*. This is not because it is impossible to tell good buildings from bad buildings. In fact, there are probably hundreds of books and articles on architectural history and architectural theory that try to separate good buildings from bad buildings.² Some of these books have tried to set down manifestos for the ages.³ But most have recognized that buildings can be good or bad in different ways and for different reasons, and that such judgments are often deeply contextual, and tied up in the complicated history of various movements and social trends. In the words of Stendhal, as quoted in Alain de Botton's wonderful recent book on architectural style, "Beauty is the promise of happiness", and "There are as many styles of beauty as there are visions of happiness".⁴

Now maybe architecture is a bad example. Maybe architecture is just inherently more complicated and controversial than flag design. I'm not sure that's entirely true, particularly once we recognize how profoundly flag design is connected to questions of emotion, politics, identity, and even semiotics. In any event, though, consider a simpler example: the design and use of typefaces, which is a branch of graphic design. What could be more straightforward than lettering? But, again, there are hundreds of books and articles and university courses that explore the aesthetics of type design, in the context of particular uses and contexts for such type.⁵ There are good fonts and bad fonts. More important, there are good fonts and bad fonts for different purposes and in different context. But, as all these books and articles and courses demonstrate, there is no simple, all-encompassing, guide to good fonts and bad fonts.

It should be possible, similarly, to think rigorously and interestingly about the aesthetics of flag design without trying to reduce the matter to a short list of rules. But how to begin? How can we get a handle on the topic? In this paper, I want to suggest one possibility.



Figure 5. *Flag of Maryland* (Wikimedia Commons)

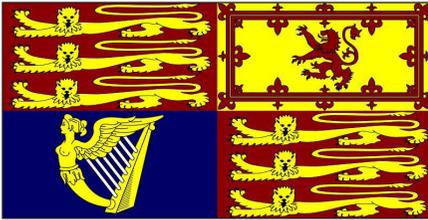


Figure 6. *Royal Standard of the United Kingdom* (Wikimedia Commons)

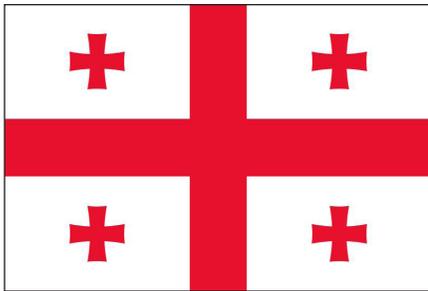


Figure 7. *Flag of the nation of Georgia* (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 8. *Flag of Scotland* (Wikimedia Commons)

The approach I am suggesting is built on a central and well-known fact: with some notable and important exceptions, flag design has tended over the centuries to be guided by various distinct styles or genres, sometimes called flag families, many of them borrowed from related disciplines. These genres include: flags based on complex heraldic traditions (Figures 5–6); flags based on a single, simpler, religious symbol—the cross (Figures 7–9); flags based on the colors of liveries or cockades; flags based on governmental seals (Figures 10–11); and so on. These genres or styles or families have distinct artistic and political histories; many of the best books about flags are organized around them.⁶

But the centrality of genres to flag design can also provide the framework around which to flesh out some theories on the aesthetics of flags. We can tell the story of flag design and flag aesthetics in terms of a continuing process of experimentation and development as various genres get tried out, work well or badly, wax and wane, combine and reconfigure, and—sometimes—get trans-

formed by a moment of brilliant rule-breaking. This story intersects at points with the principles set out in *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, but the conclusions it reaches are, I hope, more contextual and less abstract. They can also be more sensitive, I suggest, to the political, emotional, symbolic, and historical sensibilities that shape our reaction to flags.

Let me be more specific now, and spell out some of the ways in which the simple fact of flag genres can help us think about how flags succeed, or don't succeed, aesthetically.

First, as I've emphasized, one of the most important features of flag genres is that most of them are not native to flag design itself, but were borrowed from related traditions. Flag designers, in other words, have usually been cultural and aesthetic scroungers or scavengers. So one of the basic questions always worth asking, with regard to any particular genre, is how well that scavenging has worked. Exhibit One here is, of course, the notorious "seal on a bedsheet" (Figure 12). This particular genre is, by common agreement, a disaster in flag

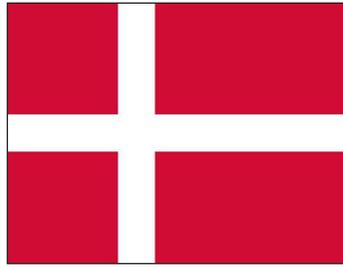


Figure 9. Flag of Denmark (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 10. Flag of New Hampshire (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 11. Flag of the Emperor of Japan, with emblem of the Japanese imperial seal (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 12. Flag of Utah (Wikimedia Commons)

design. But it is a disaster at a genre level—largely because the traditions, functions, and aesthetics of seals do not translate easily or well into the traditions, functions, and aesthetics of flags. Seals are miniatures, often drawn in great detail both to show off the artistry of the designer and to thwart forgeries. Flags are large-scale works. Seals often require a combination of words and designs to serve their precise legal function. Flags do not. Finally, seals do not inherently fill up the field of a flag, which can lead to a particularly uninteresting result if no thought is given to the background behind the seal.

All that said, however, we risk overreacting. *Good Flag, Bad Flag* tells us not to put seals on flags. It also tells us to keep flags simple, with 2 or 3 colors, and no lettering. But the problem with seals on a bedsheet is not their complexity, or their lettering, or any other single feature—it is all these features together. Seals on a bedsheet are the perfect storm of bad design. To extract too many specific aesthetic conclusions from this overall failure of translation from one design tradition to another is just a mistake. Indeed, it is even a mistake, it seems to me, to say that seals can never succeed on flags. To the extent that a flag is meant to convey a sense of specific legal authority, as in a presidential flag (Figure 13), a seal on a bedsheet might just do the trick. Moreover, seals can work just fine if—instead of just being dumped on a dark blue background—they are integrated into a larger design. (Figures 14–17).



Figure 13. *Flag of the President of the United States*
(Wikimedia Commons)

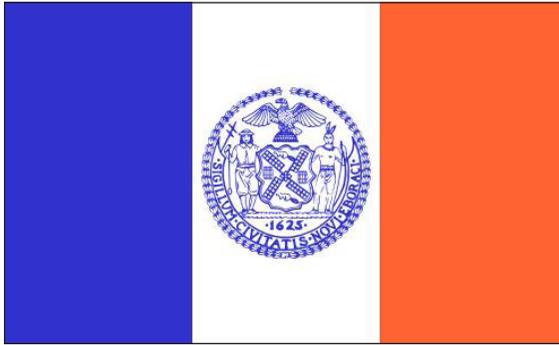


Figure 14. Flag of the City of New York (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 15. Flag of the London Port Authority (World flags database at www.flags.net)



Figure 16. Flag of Florida (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 17. *Flag of Seattle, Washington* (Seattle municipal web site: <http://www.seattle.gov/CityArchives/Facts/flag.htm>)

Good Flag, Bad Flag says that “only simple designs make effective flags.”⁷ But this ignores the simple aesthetic fact that intricate designs, even if the viewer cannot understand all their details, can still contribute to a powerful, overall, effect (Figure 18). The trick, which can be as true for flags as for buildings or paintings or music, and which is hard to reduce to a rule, is to find that perfect balance, under the circumstances, between complexity and simplicity.



Figure 18. *“The Garden of Earthly Delights”*, by Hieronymus Bosch (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 19. Heraldic banners of the King of Arms (Wikimedia Common)

As noted, the first question that a genre analysis of flags might ask is how well the genre works as an act of cultural scavenging from one aesthetic tradition to another. But the analysis of a genre is not just a static thing. It also has a dynamic component. Genres—even successful ones—have a history. And flags themselves—as political symbols, markers of identity, and carriers of emotional resonance—also have a history.⁸ And all that history might have a good deal to say about a particular genre’s place in flag design. Consider, in this regard, flags inspired by heraldry, in particular the proper heraldic banners that blow up the main design of a shield into the rectangular space of a flag (Figure 19). Heraldic banners can be stunningly beautiful (Figures 20–21). The translation from shield to flag is, all things considered, relatively straightforward. Most



Figure 20. Flag of British Columbia (Wikimedia Commons)

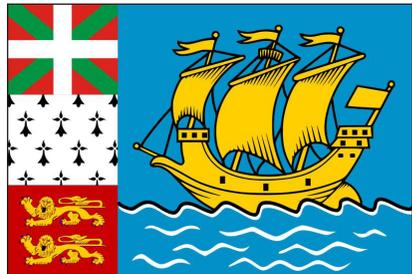


Figure 21. Flag of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 22. Hyghalmen Roll of Arms, 15th century (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 23. The Queen, with her Personal Standard for Canada, reviewing the troops. (Canadian heritage website, at http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/cpsc-ccsp/fr-rflguide_e.cfm).

important, heraldic designs draw on a rich and wonderfully subtle symbolic vocabulary (Figure 22). Nevertheless, few national flags today, and relatively few newer flags overall, are classic heraldic banners. There are many reasons for this, perhaps, but the most important, I suspect, is that traditional heraldry is just too firmly associated with aristocracy and even feudalism to carry the political and emotional charge that most national flags require. Heraldic banners can and do succeed as royal standards, which are unashamedly aristocratic (Figure 23), or as the flags of jurisdictions, such as the State of Maryland (Figure 24) that want to emphasize



Figure 24. Francis Street, Annapolis, Maryland (Annapolis photo gallery, Annapolis city web site, at <http://www.ci.annapolis.md.us/info.asp?page=3101>)

whether the horizontal tricolor of the Netherlands (Figure 26) or the vertical tricolor of republican France (Figure 27)—must have seemed in their day. And much of that power and beauty is still evident. Tricolors are not only simple, they are bold and unornamented. They have the same sort of power as a great neoclassical building, with its straightforward columns, (Figure 28) or a great modern skyscraper (Figure 29), with its bold, self-confident, deceptive simplicity.



Figure 26. Flag of the Netherlands (Wikimedia Commons)

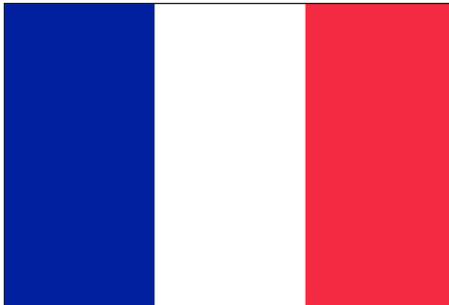


Figure 27. Flag of France (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 28 (left). Second Bank of the United States (Wikimedia Commons, from website of National Park Service) Figure 29 (right). Seagram Building, New York City (Freebase.com, at <http://www.freebase.com/view/guid/9202a8c04000641f800000004974f69>)



Figure 30. “Liberty Leading the People”, by Eugène Delacroix (Wikimedia Commons)

The great tricolors built on traditions of national colors, but gave them a new political charge, associated with a new modern Europe.⁹ They dispensed with the old symbols, whether heraldic or religious, and for that matter dispensed with overt symbolism entirely, except for whatever meaning could be drawn out of the colors themselves. They were thus able to convey a new sense of national sovereignty built on formal identity and republican virtue (Figure 30).

Subsequent tricolors tried to convey a loyalty to these same republican virtues in a distinctively different national garb. Thus, the Italian tricolor



Figure 31. Flag of Italy (Wikimedia Commons)

replaced the blue band on the French tricolor with a green band (Figure 31), and the Irish tricolor sought to suggest that Catholic—green—and Protestants—orange—could unite in a single free and independent republic (Figure 32). Meanwhile, the Dutch horizontal tricolor was emulated as well, becoming,

for example, the model for the flag of Russia and then the variety of pan-Slavic flags (Figures 33–35).

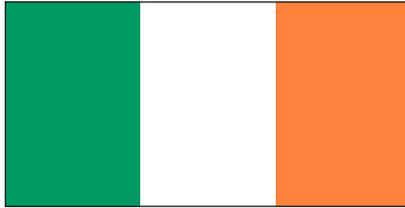


Figure 32. Flag of Ireland (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 33. Flag of Russia (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 34. National flag of Serbia (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 35. Pan-Slavic flag (Wikimedia Commons)

The problem, though, is that—however powerful and bold the tricolor is—each successive variation is that much less powerful and that much less bold. There are only so many variations on the theme. And once those variations lost their direct connection to the political impulse that inspired the original tricolors, they became less symbolically effective and less interesting. Most importantly, though, repetition at some point just reaches a point of diminishing aesthetic and emotional returns, whether in flags or art or architecture. Genres organize the creative effort. And certain genres are so bold and powerful that they create a template that is simultaneously enormously fruitful and inherently self-extinguishing.

Good Flag, Bad Flag tries to convey some of this historical process with its admonition that flags should “be distinctive or be related.”¹⁰ But

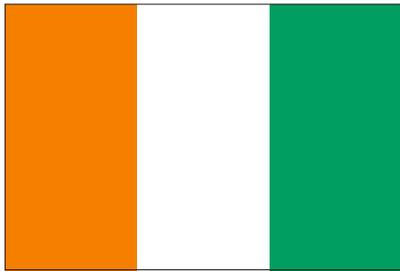


Figure 36. Flag of Ivory Coast (Wikimedia Commons)

that principle doesn't really convey the sense that flag genres have a history, and that the aesthetics of individual flags can never be isolated from that history. Nor does it sufficiently emphasize the path-dependent character of aesthetic judgment. The flag of the Ivory Coast (Figure 36) is not inherently less effective than the flag of Ireland; but it is—in fact—less effective, and less beautiful and less interesting, if only because it came later.

A third important observation about the analysis of flags and flag genres is that genres are themselves never entirely static or hermetically sealed off from each other. Sometimes, the limitations built into two different genres can be overcome just by combining them. Take a tricolor, and charge it with



Figure 37. Flag of Mexico (Wikimedia Commons)

a seal or a coat of arms, and the resulting flag can convey both the political or historical heritage conveyed by the tricolor and the more distinctive identity captured by the seal. Consider, for example, the flag of New York City or the flag of Mexico (Figure 37). These flags certainly have too much detail

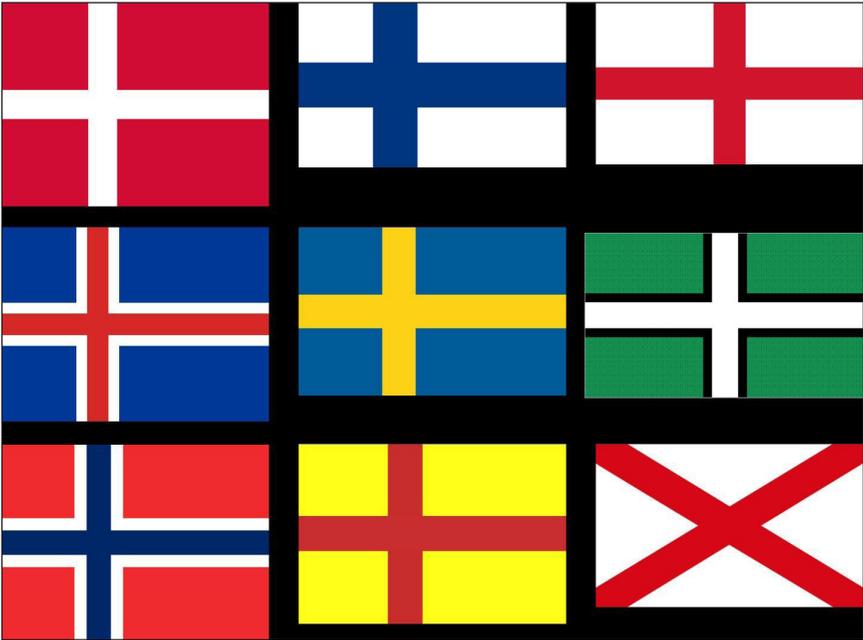


Figure 38. Flags of Denmark, Finland, England, Iceland, Sweden, Devon, Norway, Kalmar (Union of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), and Alabama (author's compilation)

to be considered “good” by the criteria of *Good Flag*, *Bad Flag*. But that judgment ignores how they effectively take recognizable symbols of identity—whether the New York windmill or the Mexican eagle and snake—and juxtapose them effectively against a larger, sparer, more international, symbolic vocabulary that relies solely on color and shape.

Similarly, some of the most successful flags are effective precisely because of how their design transforms—and breaks the implicit rules of—an existing genre. For example, one of the oldest genres of flag design is the simple cross. Like the tricolor, the cross is bold and effective, though more symbolically overt. And like the tricolor, it risks petering out with successive iterations (Figure 38). But the designers of the flag of the United Kingdom reconceived the genre in a way that turned out to be symbolically brilliant and aesthetically rich, and a staggeringly effective way to represent the joining of two, then three, national identities in one sovereign state (Figure 39). Similarly, the South African flag gains much of its force from the way that it takes an existing genre—the horizontal tricolor—and breaks it apart while

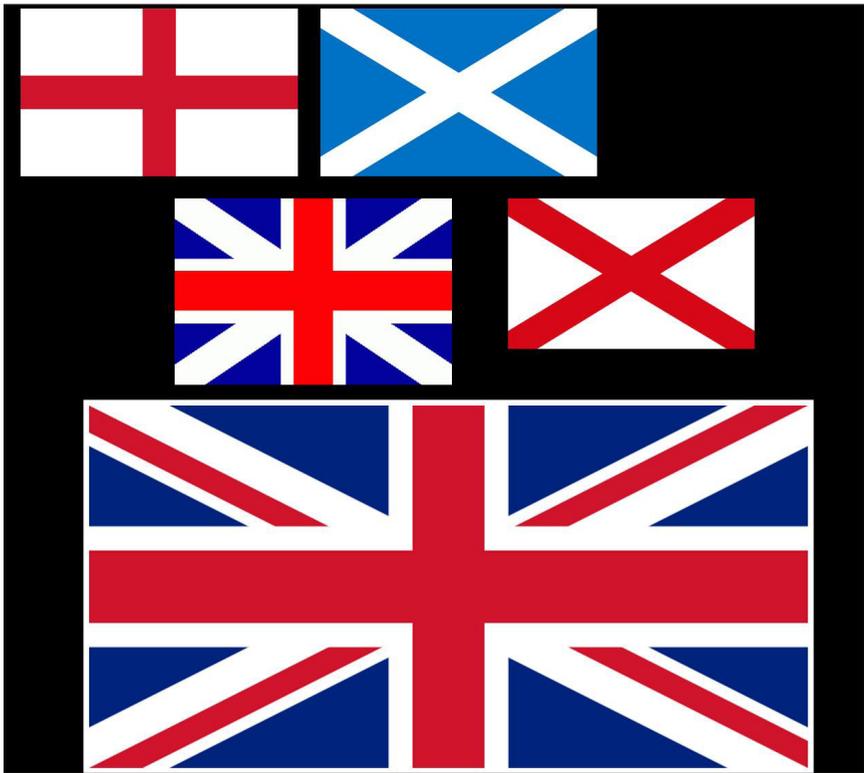


Figure 39. *Flags of England, Scotland, Great Britain, St. Patrick (Ireland), and the United Kingdom (author's compilation)*

still respecting its essence¹¹ (Figure 40). Like the Union Jack, it simultaneously represents an advance in flag design and a politically powerful way to symbolize the peaceful reconciliation of disparate peoples and symbolic traditions in one nation. The South African flag again breaks some of the rules in *Good Flag, Bad Flag*. It contains too many colors, for example. But—understood as a genre-transforming effort—the flag succeeds precisely because it breaks the rules. And that is perhaps the most important point to be made here: As with all art and design, the difficult but ultimately necessary challenge is to push the envelope, but to do so with intelligence, understanding, and verve. The best composers, the best painters, the best sculptors, the best architects, the best graphic designers, know and respect the tradition out of which their work proceeds. But they also know when and how to begin a new tradition for their successors.



Figure 40. *Flags of the Netherlands, African National Congress, and South Africa (author's compilation)*

This all leads to a fourth observation. Thinking of flag design in terms of genres or styles with their own traditions and sensibilities also gives us a way of evaluating specific elements or design choices on particular flags. Consider the question of lettering on flags. *Good Flag, Bad Flag* is unforgiving: “Never use writing of any kind... Words defeat the purpose.” But this rule is surely both too rigid and too abstract. If nothing else, recall the flag of Saudi Arabia, which is dominated by writing (Figure 41), or the post-revolutionary flag of Iran, which incorporates writing to distinguish its more traditional



Figure 41. *Flag of Saudi Arabia (FOTW web site; image by António Martins)*



Figure 42. *Flag of Iran* (Wikimedia Commons)

tricolor design. (Figure 42) To be sure, these flags reflect a long and beautiful tradition of decorative calligraphy in Islam—a tradition that reflects both a reverence for the written Koran and religious objections to more representational forms of art.

But Europe, (Figure 43) not to mention East Asia, (Figure 44) also have powerful, old and beautiful, calligraphic traditions, and it would be surprising if these traditions never found their way into flags (Figures 45–49).

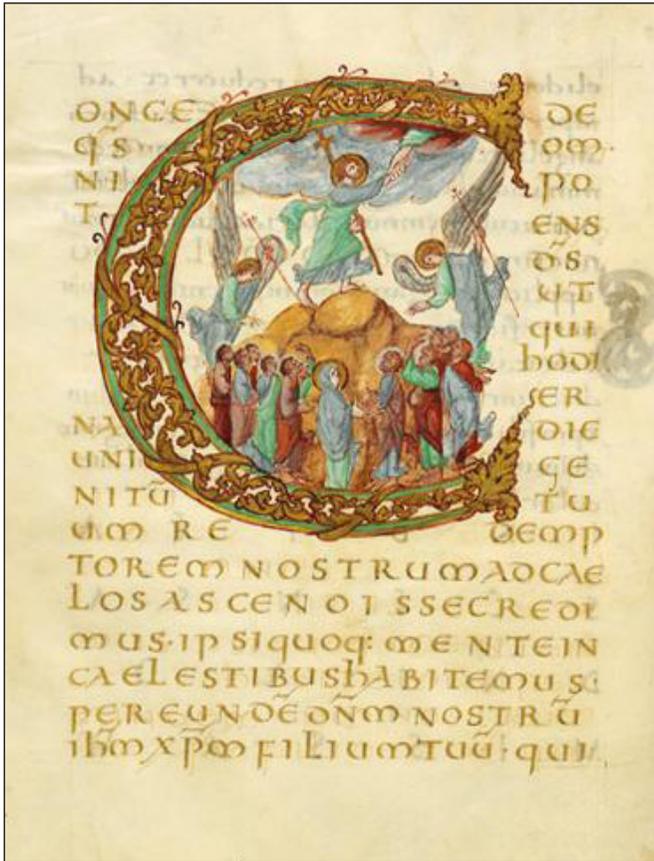


Figure 43. *From the Sacramentaire de Drogon* (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 44. The actor Ichikawa Ebizō, full-length, standing on stage, holding a cannon; woodcut by Kiyomasu Torii (Library of Congress, Digital ID: jpd 01787)

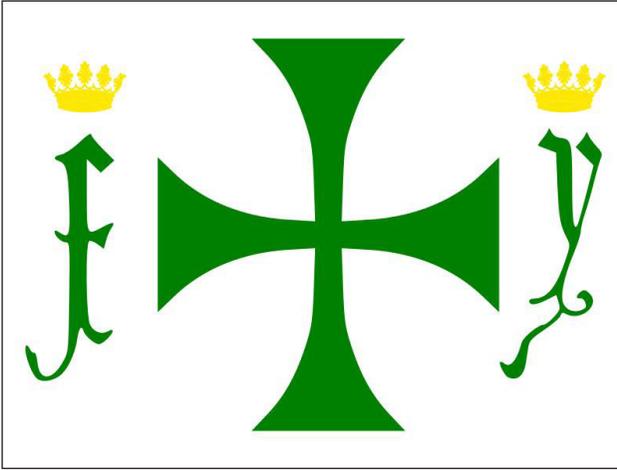


Figure 45. *Captain's Ensign of Christopher Columbus*
(Wikimedia Commons; image by Oren neu dag)



Figure 46. *Flag of the Kaiser* (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 47. Flag of the Swiss canton of Appenzell Ausserrhoden (Wikimedia Commons)

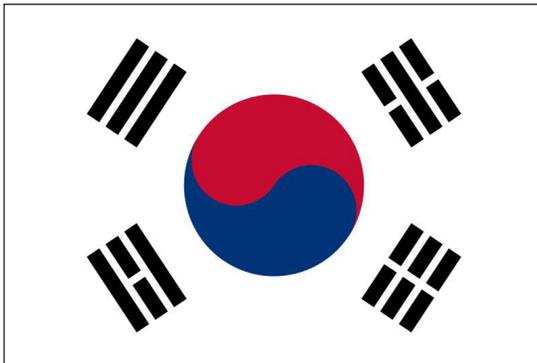


Figure 48. Flag of South Korea (Wikimedia Commons)

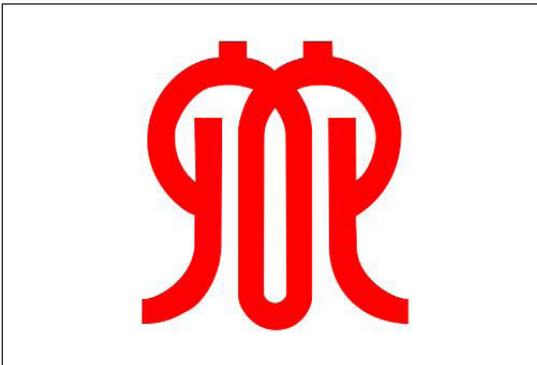


Figure 49. Flag of Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 50 (left). *Flag of Oklahoma, 1925-41* (Oklahoma State Senate web site, at http://www.oksenate.gov/news/press_releases/press_releases_2005/pr20050407.html)



Figure 51 (right). *Flag of Oklahoma* (Wikimedia Commons)

To be sure, adding lettering or words sometimes turns good flags bad, (Figures 50–51)¹² and often makes bad flags worse (Figures 52–53). But the real problem, it seems to me, is that words are often put on flags out of nothing more than a misguided and essentially lazy sense that, without the words, the flags would not be identifiable. That is to say, words are often put on flags without any regard to genre or style or aesthetic composition.



Figure 52. *Flag of Montana, 1905-1981* (FOITW; image by Valentin Poposki)



Figure 53. *Flag of Montana* (Wikimedia Commons)

But there are at least five circumstances in which lettering or words on flags can make good aesthetic sense:

First, the lettering might, as in the Saudi Arabian flag, reflect a powerful design tradition of its own. In that respect, calligraphic flags are like heraldic flags or flags with crosses—a sound and often effective act of cultural borrowing.

Second, lettering on flags might reflect a tradition that marks a specific type of flag. For example, the flags of shipping companies and yacht clubs often include lettering. (Figures 54–57). The presence of lettering is, in effect, part of the tradition of that

subset of flags. It links these flags to each other the same way that all republican tricolors or all Scandinavian crosses are related to each other.

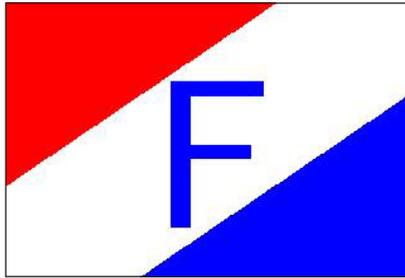


Figure 54. Flag of Newry & Kilkeel Steam Ship Co., Ltd. (FOTW; by Phil Nelson)



Figure 55. Westfal-Larsen & Co. (FOTW; image by James Dignan)

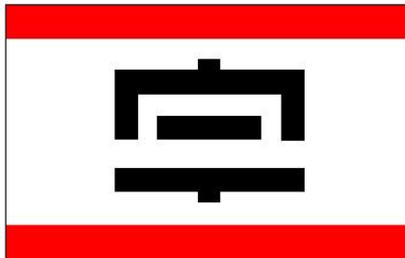


Figure 56. Flag of Uwajima Unyu K.K. (FOTW; image by Phil Nelson)

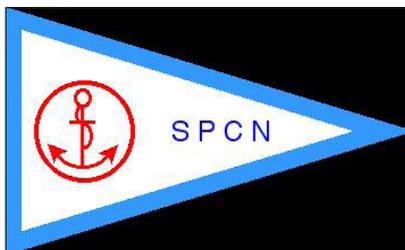


Figure 57. Flag of the Syndicat Libre des Pêcheurs Professionnels de Rive Neuve (FOTW; image by Ivan Sache)

Third, lettering—used with proper calligraphic and artistic skill—can be a conventional device for particularizing a flag. This is the point, for example, of the “E” in Queen Elizabeth’s various personal standards (Figures 58–60).

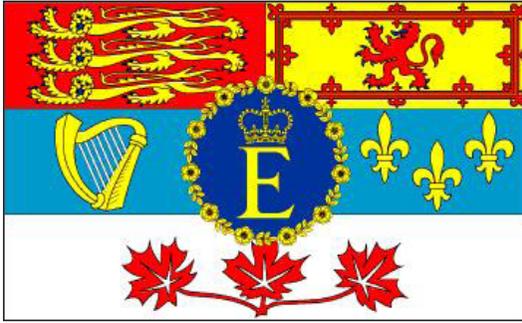


Figure 58. Queen’s Personal Standard for Canada (FOTW; image by Graham Bartram)

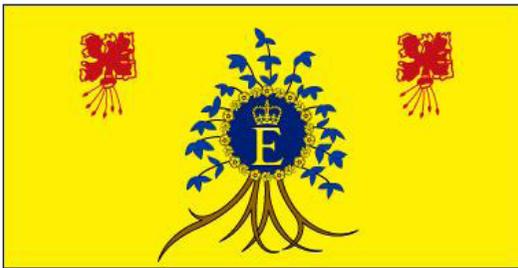


Figure 59. Queen’s Personal Standard for Barbados (FOTW; image by Graham Bartram)

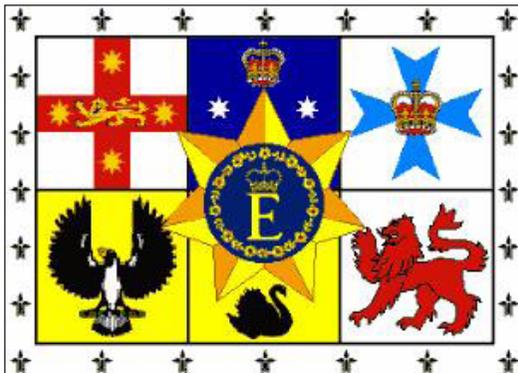


Figure 60. Queen’s Personal Standard for Australia (FOTW; image by Blas Delgado Ortiz)

Fourth, lettering can give a flag something of the feel of more spontaneous, visceral, expressive devices such as political placards. For example, the phrase “Live Free or Die” on the Gadsden flag (Figure 61) and the putative First Navy Jack (Figure 62) captures a certain rawness that mere images might not. Even the flag of one Swiss canton is essentially a traditional bicolor charged with a political motto (Figure 63). Or consider the matchless flag of the Solidarity movement in Poland (Figure 64).



Figure 61. *Gadsden Flag* (http://libertarian-wiki.org/Image:Gadsden_Flag.gif)



Figure 62. *Naval Jack of the United States* (Wikimedia Commons)

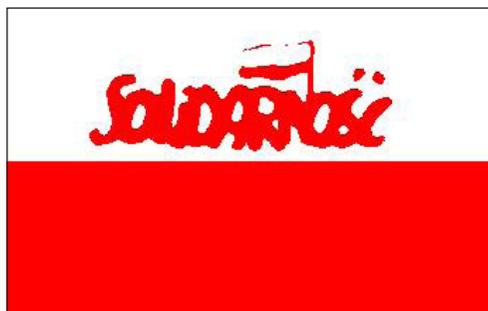


Figure 63 (left). *Flag of the Swiss canton of Vaud* (FOTW; image by António Martins)
 Figure 64 (right). *Solidarity movement flag* (FOTW; image by António Martins)



Figure 65. *Flag of California* (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 66. *Flag of California* (Author's annotation of a public domain image)



Figure 67. *Flag of California* (Author's annotation of a public domain image)

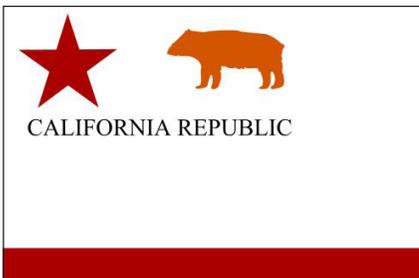


Figure 68. *Original "Bear Flag" of the California Republic* (Wikimedia Commons)

Fifth, in some flag traditions—including the design of regimental flags and the like in some countries—lettering is used to “deface” (as the heraldists would put it) a national or other flag to identify it with a particular organization.¹³

Finally, lettering sometimes makes sense in a particular aesthetic and symbolic context, as one element in a well-integrated design. Take, for example, the flag of California, which is widely regarded as one of the best state flags (Figure 65). The phrase “California Republic” actually serves a specific visual purpose in that flag. It is a horizontal element in its own right (Figure 66) that visually mediates between, and unites, the other horizontal elements in the flag, in particular the green grass plot and the red bar at the bottom. Just as important, though, is that word “Republic” in “California Republic” (Figure 67). The point is not just to remind the viewer that this is the flag of California, something that would be unnecessary and silly, but to evoke the brief but deeply symbolically-loaded month or so that California was an independent commonwealth.

(Figure 68) In that sense, the words “California Republic” serve the same expressive function as the lone star in the Texas flag (Figure 69) or even the Union Jack in the Hawaiian flag (Figure 70)—to emphasize that this state is more than just a state.

The larger point, though, is not whether lettering belongs on flags. It is, rather, that we need to consider this question in the light of context—whether the context of aesthetic traditions such as calligraphy, or traditions specific to flags, or the emotional and symbolic force that certain words can carry in certain contexts. In fact, once we understand more fully the possible contexts for lettering on flags, it might even be possible to distinguish, with more precision, “good lettering” from “bad lettering”.¹⁴

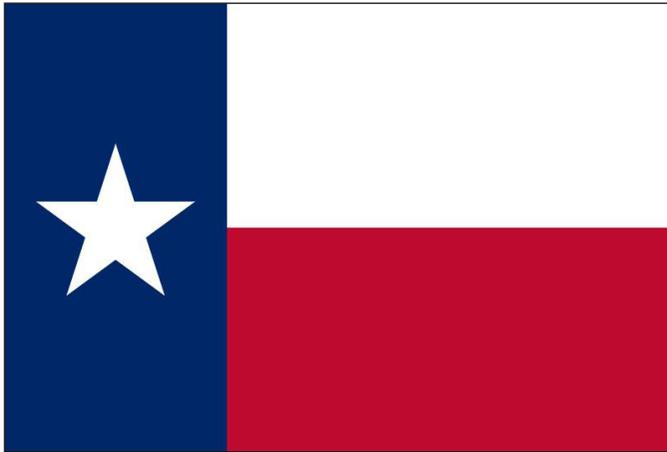


Figure 69. Flag of Texas (Wikimedia Commons)

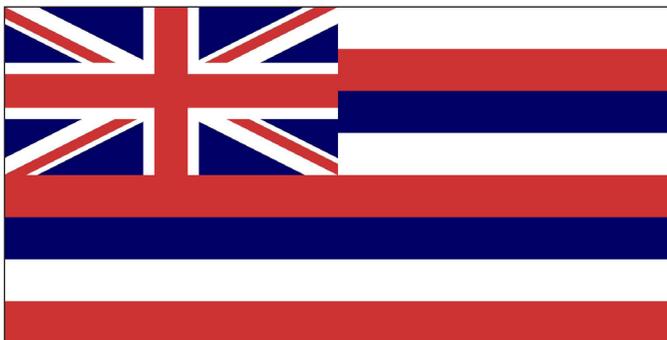


Figure 70. Flag of Hawaii (Wikimedia Commons)

This paper has been gently critical of *Good Flag, Bad Flag*. But it is worth repeating the point made at the start. The publication of *Good Flag, Bad Flag* is a positive and important development. It is even historic. Indeed, the sort of genre analysis I am proposing helps clarify just how historic *Good Flag, Bad Flag* is. I have stressed here that many flags and many genres of flag design were borrowed from, or influenced by, other design traditions. This was never entirely true, of course. The United States flag, for example, while it can be traced to various predecessors, almost seems worthy to be called a miraculous conception, often copied (Figures 71–72) but still original.¹⁵ Nevertheless, most flags over time have fit comfortably into existing molds.

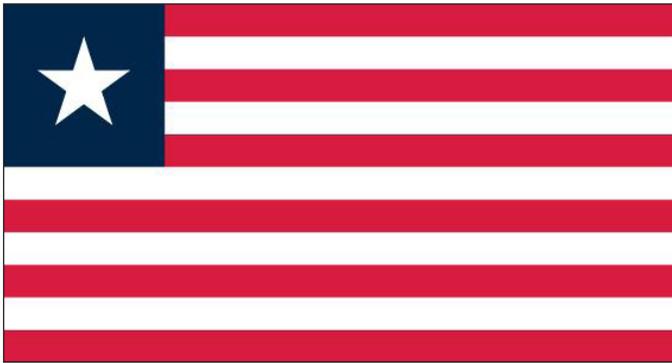


Figure 71. Flag of Liberia (Wikimedia Commons)

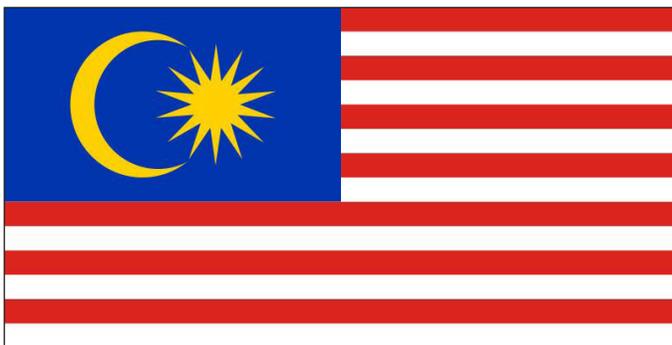


Figure 72. Flag of Malaysia (Wikimedia Commons)

The last sixty years or so, however, have witnessed a new, major development in flag design: the steady evolution of both more eclectic flag designs (Figures 73–76) and an aesthetic vocabulary and tradition that is more genuinely independent of other traditions, which is to say more autonomous to the process of flag design itself (Figures 77–79). This is partly a political development, having to do with post-colonialism. It also reflects the growth of vexillology as a self-conscious field, and the influence of Whitney Smith and his colleagues.

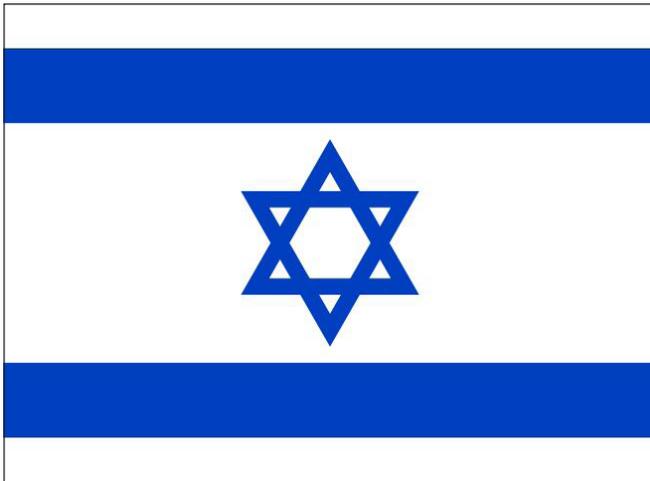


Figure 73. Flag of Israel (Wikimedia Commons)

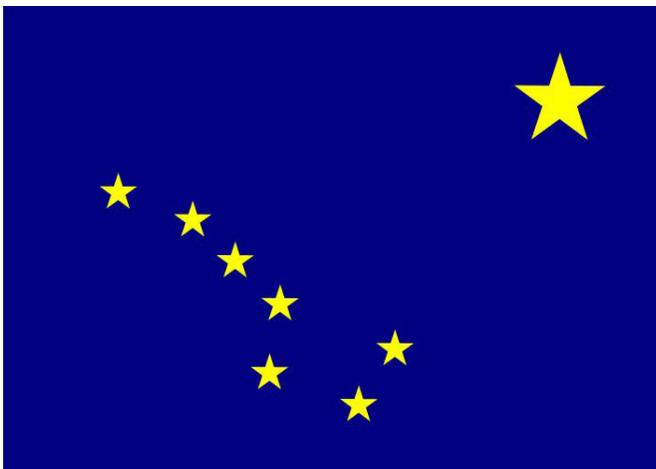


Figure 74. Flag of Alaska (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 75. Flag of Turkmenistan (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 76. Flag of the Clatsop-Nehalem Tribe (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 77. Flag of Denver, Colorado (NAVA web site, www.nava.org; image by Peter Orenski)

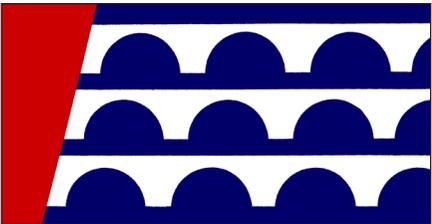


Figure 78. Flag of Des Moines, Iowa (NAVA web site, www.nava.org; image by Peter Orenski)

In any event, *Good Flag, Bad Flag* can best be appreciated, not as flag gospel, but as an effort to codify one particular vocabulary of flag design. That vocabulary is very specific. It relies on inventive, bold, but relatively simple geometric designs, a strong emphasis on color, explicit and often clever symbolism, and a particular sensitivity to filling the entire rectangular field of a flag. Of course, it rejects seals, lettering, and even much of heraldry, except in pared-down, stylized versions. Not all flags in this new tradition use this vocabulary in its entirety, but many do, and most come close.

As noted, *Good Flag, Bad Flag* is an exciting effort to reconceive of flag design as an autonomous discipline. It makes clear that flag designers need be cultural scavengers no longer. More important, the aesthetic vocabulary of *Good Flag, Bad Flag* is, on its own terms, wonderfully effective. It can produce flags that are beautiful, symbolically rich, and expressive.

For all its virtues, however, *Good Flag, Bad Flag* needs to be understood for what it is—one

flag genre among others. It is an example of good flag design principles, not an exhaustive account of them.

Consider the recent issue of *NAVA News* (#194) that featured a set of proposed designs for new state flags, most of them obviously influenced by principles akin to those of *Good Flag, Bad Flag*. Individually, most of these flags were perfectly adequate, and many were quite good. Most were also certainly better than the flags they proposed to replace. But, as a group, they had a certain sameness to them, a sense that a limited set of artistic moves were being reshuffled and reconfigured in small directions.



Figure 79. *Flag of Richmond, Virginia* (FOTW, image by Matthew White)

Consider also that in some recent flag design contests, organizers directed the juries to score submitted designs on a ten-point scale drawn directly from *Good Flag, Bad Flag*—two points for each rule.¹⁶ Such a system might give the appearance of rigor and even science to the art of flag design. But it is also potentially stultifying. It ignores the simple fact, as true for flags as for any other design discipline or artistic tradition, that genres change, combine and recombine, and occasionally veer off in entirely new directions.

To be sure, *Good Flag, Bad Flag* was written as a practical guide to flag design, not a definitive treatise. Moreover, one of the banes (as well as one of the fascinations) of the study of flags is that both flag design and the selection of flags are in many places often left in the hands of amateurs—state legislatures, civic groups, students, and ordinary citizens.¹⁷ Even taking both the limited purpose of *Good Flag, Bad Flag* and its intended audience into account, however, the austerity and dogmatism of its approach should give considerable pause. For one thing, as noted earlier *Good Flag, Bad Flag* risks becoming gospel among vexillologists themselves. In fact, in important respects the principles articulated in *Good Flag, Bad Flag* have succeeded in both capturing the existing sentiments of many flag enthusiasts and at the same time “framing” the vexillological conversation. This is, of

course, a tribute to the booklet's greatest virtue—that it is (outside of the heraldic literature) probably the only current systematic effort at developing any sort of coherent, systematic, prescriptive principles for flag design. But it is also, unfortunately, proof of the old adage that “great power involves great responsibility.”¹⁸ Moreover, even amateurs—the intended audience of *Good Flag, Bad Flag*—might well be able to appreciate, and effectively take to heart, a more calibrated balance between simple principles and an appreciation of aesthetic diversity and development.¹⁹

Ultimately, though, the challenge at hand is not only about the teaching of flag design. It is more crucially about the character of vexillology itself. If vexillology is to join the other well-established disciplines of applied design, it needs to find that happy balance between rigor and imagination. It also needs, quite frankly, to expand and enrich its own sense of what it is. At one level, vexillology is a hobby like stamp collecting or coin collecting. This sort of hobbyist activity is perfectly respectable, and a source of tremendous pleasure. If collecting, cataloging, and describing flags were all that vexillology tried to do, it would still be a worthy diversion. But, from its start as an activity with a name, vexillology has aspired to be something more—to be a “scholarly” and even “scientific” enterprise, interested in understanding flags, their history, and their place in the symbolic order. At least one important vexillologist has suggested to me in conversation that a focus on the norms of flag design, including an effort such as *Good Flag, Bad Flag*, and my own article here, gets in the way of vexillology's aspiration to be “scholarly” and “scientific.” But exactly the contrary is true. Too much vexillological writing, after all, to be honest about it, has been merely descriptive and archival rather than truly scholarly or scientific; it has, to use Benedetto Croce's famous distinction,²⁰ produced mere “chronicles” rather than history. Genuine social science—history or sociology or anthropology—is interpretive. It picks and chooses, and discriminates between the significant and the trivial. It seeks to find patterns. It strives for understanding. One way to elevate vexillology into the sort of scholarly discipline it aspired to be is to recognize that the “scientific” study of any artistic or design discipline must necessarily go hand-in-hand with, and reinforce, and even overlap with, a rich and sophisticated critical literature. (Imagine art history without art criticism, or architectural history without

architectural criticism.) Indeed, the two forms of scholarship—“objective” studies into the history and sociology of flags, on the one hand, and “subjective” accounts of flag aesthetics, on the other—depend on each other, and each can only be as good and rich as the other. A compelling aesthetic account informs the categories and interpretations of genuine historical and other social scientific research. And a grounding in history, sociology, and the like is necessary to lend depth and perspective to aesthetic judgments and prescriptions for design.

Good Flag, Bad Flag came along at just the right time, as vexillology is grappling more self-consciously with its own identity. But rather than being the last word on the subject, it should, as I’ve suggested in this paper, be only the beginning of a very long conversation. The enterprise of designing and appreciating “good flags”, in other words, needs to think of itself as a tradition with a complex and rich history, respecting a set of principles developed through difficult trial and error, but also always open to the next great idea that is waiting inevitably just at the top of a flagpole yet unseen.

This paper was first presented at NAVA’s 41st Annual Meeting in Hartford, Connecticut, where its author was presented the Captain William Driver Award for the year’s best contribution to vexillological scholarship.



Endnotes

1. Ted Kaye, *Good Flag, Bad Flag* (North American Vexillological Association, 2006). The electronic version is available at http://www.nava.org/Flag%20Design/GFBF/GFBF_Final_Web.pdf.
2. Some random examples might include Gaston Bachelard and M. Jolas, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994); Frank Ching, *Architecture—Form, Space, & Order*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2007); Roger H. Clark and Michael Pause, *Precedents in Architecture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1996); Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, 2d Unit States ed. (Cambridge Mass.: M.I.T. Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1962); Alain De Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006); Matthew Frederick, *101 Things I Learned in Architecture School*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).
3. Two famous and controversial examples include Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books of Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965) and Le Corbusier, *The City of To-Morrow and Its Planning*, 3d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971).
4. De Botton, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
5. Again, a set of random examples might include Rob Carter, Philip B. Meggs, and Ben Day, *Typographic Design : Form and Communication*, 4th ed. (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2007); Paul C. Gutfjahr and Megan Benton, *Illuminating Letters : Typography and Literary Interpretation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Ellen Lupton, *Thinking with Type : A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors, & Students*, 1st ed. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004); Laurent Pflughaupt, *Letter by Letter : A Cultural History of the Alphabet* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008); Herbert Spencer, *Pioneers of Modern Typography*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004); Walter Tracy, *Letters of Credit : A View of Type Design*, 1st U.S. ed. (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1986).
6. See, for example, Alfred Znamierowski, *The World Encyclopedia of Flags* (Lorenz Books, 2005). More practical guides to flag-watching are even more obviously drawn to organization by genre or graphic style. See, for example, V.S. de Kleer, *A Visual Guide to the Flags of the World* (Chatham Publishing, 2007).
7. Kaye, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Indeed, Kaye argues that “the flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory.” *Ibid.*
8. Whitney Smith has written particularly eloquently about the political and aesthetic history of flag design. See, for example, “Political Symbolism”, *The Flag Bulletin* No. 223 (2006). See also, for example, Ron Hassner, “Evolution of the Sacred Flag and the Modern Nation-State”, *The Flag Bulletin*, No. 191 (2000). More specific studies of the relation between the aesthetic, symbolic, and political aspects of flag design include Rick Archbold, *I Stand for Canada: The Story of*

the Maple Leaf Flag (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 2002); Zvi Ruder, *The National Colors of the People of Israel: Tradition, Religion, Philosophy, and Politics Intertwined* (Jerusalem: Shamir Publications, 1999).

9. See Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World* (McGraw-Hill Book Co., Ltd., 1975).
10. Kaye, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
11. The new South African flag has memorably been described as “The flag that looked like a beach towel but united the nation.” *Weekly Mail and Guardian*, quoted in Judith Matloff, “What’s in a Name? A New South Africa Alters its Symbols.” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 9 January 1995, p. 5.
12. Interestingly, the state name was apparently added to the Oklahoma flag in 1941 as part of an effort to combat illiteracy. “Flag of Oklahoma.” Accessed 7 August 2008. Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Oklahoma>.
13. Such “defaced” flags are often not meant to be “good flags” in their own right, but merely auxiliaries to the flag that they “deface”. They are in a sense, “background” flags akin to what architects call “background buildings”. The larger issue lurking here is that other flags as well—even many without lettering—sometimes play this “background” role, or at least did when they were first designed. As Whitney Smith has pointed out, for example, many state flags in the United States were very self-consciously designed, particularly in the wake of the Civil War, not to stand out. How to give a full aesthetic account of such “background flags” is well beyond the scope of this essay.
14. A good guide here might be the aesthetic and functional study of architectural lettering.
15. See Marc Leepson, *Flag: An American Biography*. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin’s Press, 2005).
16. See, for example, “The Kansas City Star Flag Design Contest: A Report from the North American Vexillological Association.” North American Vexillological Association, 2005. <<http://www.nava.org/Flag%20Design/KansasCityStarReport.pdf>>. The contest scoring system did substitute “attractiveness” for “no lettering or seals” as one of its five scoring components, “since none of the finalists had lettering or seals.” *Ibid.*
17. Ted Kaye emphasized both these points to me, quite correctly, in personal conversation. Of course, in some countries, a good deal of official flag design is in the hands of accomplished, established, heraldic agencies.
18. The words, though surely not the original thought, are from an undelivered speech by Franklin Roosevelt. See Philip Sheldon Foner, ed., *Franklin Delano Roosevelt; Selections from His Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 79. A variation on the theme—“with great power comes great responsibility”—is more familiar as a recurring sentiment in the Spider-Man movies.

19. A good model for what I have in mind is Edward R. Tufte's powerfully polemical and opinionated, but also aesthetically and intellectually sophisticated classic book on *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, 2nd ed. (Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 2001). Tufte's three sequels to the Visual Display book have been equally impressive, and influential. See *Envisioning Information* (Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 1990); *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative* (Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 1997); *Beautiful Evidence* (Cheshire, Conn.: Graphics Press, 2006).

Consider also some of the better examples of guides to web page design. See, for example, Shelley Powers, *Painting the Web* (Sebastopol, Calif.: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2008). Interestingly, Powers' book—written largely for amateurs—begins by emphasizing “the wondrous variety of web graphics.” *Ibid.*, p. 2.

20. Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960).