Be Distinctive or Be Related: Stylization, Genre, and Judgment in Flag Design

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Abstract: Aesthetic assessment of flag designs is informed by cognitive processes which produce favorable judgment of visual representations with features, such as simplicity and high contrast, that are favored by most vexillographers in the United States. The process of simplifying an object for artistic purposes, known as abstraction, may be accomplished in several ways. Different processes of abstraction inform judgment of genre. The recent emergence of the "abstracted American" genre of flag design is traced through 21st-century communications about flag design and sociological observations about status-seeking and artistic taste.

In a previous volume of *Raven*, Perry Dane suggested that vexillology would benefit from "an aesthetic theory of flag design" which would draw upon the knowledge produced by scholars of literature, the arts, and music.[1] This paper represents an attempt to take up Professor Dane's challenge. It does not propose to suggest any rubric by which a critic can say which flags are in "good taste" or "beautiful"—one likes to think one is open-minded enough to refrain from such judgments—but the hope is to be able to explain how cognitive psychology, genre theory, and social signaling can explain, in one case, how many vexillographers came to esteem a particular way of designing flags. Specifically, it will trace how predominant preferences for certain types of images have been codified into widely-accepted principles of flag design. Then it will

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look at how the use of particular elements in flag design, when considered as part of a particular tradition, enable creators and viewers to understand particular flags as parts of different genres of flag design. Finally, it will examine the ways in which genre preferences are used for social signaling, and how the desire among vexillographers to be associated with highly-esteemed flag genres has helped push American civic flag design toward a new genre which is called here "abstracted American civic flags". This discussion will be focused on flag designs that are widely acclaimed among flag enthusiasts. The continued popularity of genres that are deprecated among the flag cognoscenti, such as flags with seals, lettering, or logos, is outside the scope of this study.

The discussion begins with one of Professor Dane's *obiter dicta*. He included an image of the relatively recently-adopted flags of Minnesota, Cedar Rapids, Evanston, and Dayton, and claimed they "suffer from a certain gimmicky sameness" (fig. 1).[2]

While Dane's proposition is open to a robust debate, a more compelling question is *why* Dane would see these flags as having similarity. Their differences are fairly obvious—angles and shapes, shades of color—but it seems



Figure 1 (clockwise, from top left). The flags of Minnesota (adopted 2024); Cedar Rapids, Iowa (2021); Evanston, Illinois (2024); and Dayton, Ohio (2021). (Wikimedia Commons)

likely that many agree with Dane that these flags do have something in common. That commonality is a set of shared characteristics that form a genre.

Genre springs from a shared set of perceptions about art that are grounded in a common culture. Those perceptions are, at least initially, shaped by cognitive processes that people use to form impressions about visual images. And the combination of cognitive impressions, judgments about genre, and cultural aspirations lead to the formation of taste in art, or in flags.

Genre can be examined as a defining feature of art, and scholars have explored the role that genre plays in the formation of taste, which is related to social standing. With that foundation, it is possible to explore how the emergence of a new genre in flag design reflects recent trends in writing and thinking about flag design.

The Cognitive Basis of Visual Impressions

The discussion can begin by exploring the scholarship around people's judgment of visual images—specifically, whether they find an image to be pleasant to look at.

Flag Survey Findings

When it comes to judgment about flags, there are several studies about which flags people like best. NAVA conducted surveys about U.S. and Canadian state, provincial and territorial flags in 2001; American city flags in 2004; and recently-adopted American city flags in 2022.[3] Toby Nelson also studied municipal flags in the U.S. in 2024.[4] And the internet is awash in aesthetic judgments about flags, particularly at the discussion board called Reddit, at the subreddit r/vexillology (<www.reddit.com/r/vexillology/>).

Each of the NAVA studies has methodological concerns that make it difficult to call them truly representative samples of the general population. One concern is that participants in these studies are drawn from that part of the population which is very interested in flags—call them "vexillophiles". However, it is striking that in the NAVA studies and in the most-praised designs in r/vexillology, there is an observable similarity in top-ranked (figs. 2, 3, and 4). Vexillophiles favor flags whose designs tend to be simpler, have fewer colors, eschew words, and utilize artistic stylization techniques also found in heraldry.



Figure 2. Top flags in the 2001 NAVA Survey of State and Provincial Flags: New Mexico, Texas, Québec, Maryland, Alaska, Arizona, Puerto Rico, District of Columbia, Marshall Islands, South Carolina. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 3. Top flags in the 2004 NAVA Survey of American City Flags: Washington, D.C.; Chicago, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; Phoenix, Arizona; St. Louis, Missouri; Wichita, Kansas; Portland, Oregon; Louisville, Kentucky (ca. 1927–2004); Indianapolis, Indiana; Corpus Christi, Texas. (Wikimedia Commons)

(Nelson's study surveyed a random sampling of Americans and found a broader range of preferences, with a slim majority of respondents preferring flags with seals or lettering to other design options.)

Intuitive Preferences Among Vexillophiles— and the Genesis of *"Good" Flag, Bad "Flag"*

The first NAVA survey, in 2001, was conducted by Ted Kaye to test whether his recent publication providing guidance about flag design, did, in fact, produce flag designs that vexillophiles would find pleasing. Kaye had first observed in 1996 that a study of the flags of American Indian nations (*Raven* 3–4) revealed them to have designs he found displeasing. Further discussion among colleagues in flag studies led him to believe that a publication summarizing the thinking of leading vexillographers would be useful, and in 2001 he published the brochure *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag*, with a revised edition in 2020. It should be noted that Kaye considers himself the "compiler", not the author, of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag*, and that he drew upon 20 other writers and condensed their ideas into an easily digested list of principles for flag design.

None of the writers from whom Kaye drew ideas based their suggestions upon any formal studies of perception and cognition; rather, they drew upon their own experiences and artistic instincts. A number of thinkers, including Roman Mars of the popular design podcast *99% Invisible*, have observed that *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* lays out not merely principles for flag design, but summarizes principles of good design for "almost anything"[5] This may be an overstatement, but it will be shown that studies of cognitive processing find that *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* principles correspond to effective design principles for objects in other media.

Survey results have shown that the five basic principles of flag design found in *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* can be employed to produce flags that are highly favored by vexillophiles. Those principles are:

1. **Keep It Simple:** The flag should be so simple that a child can draw it from memory.

2. **Use Meaningful Symbolism:** The flag's images, colors, or patterns should relate to what it symbolizes.

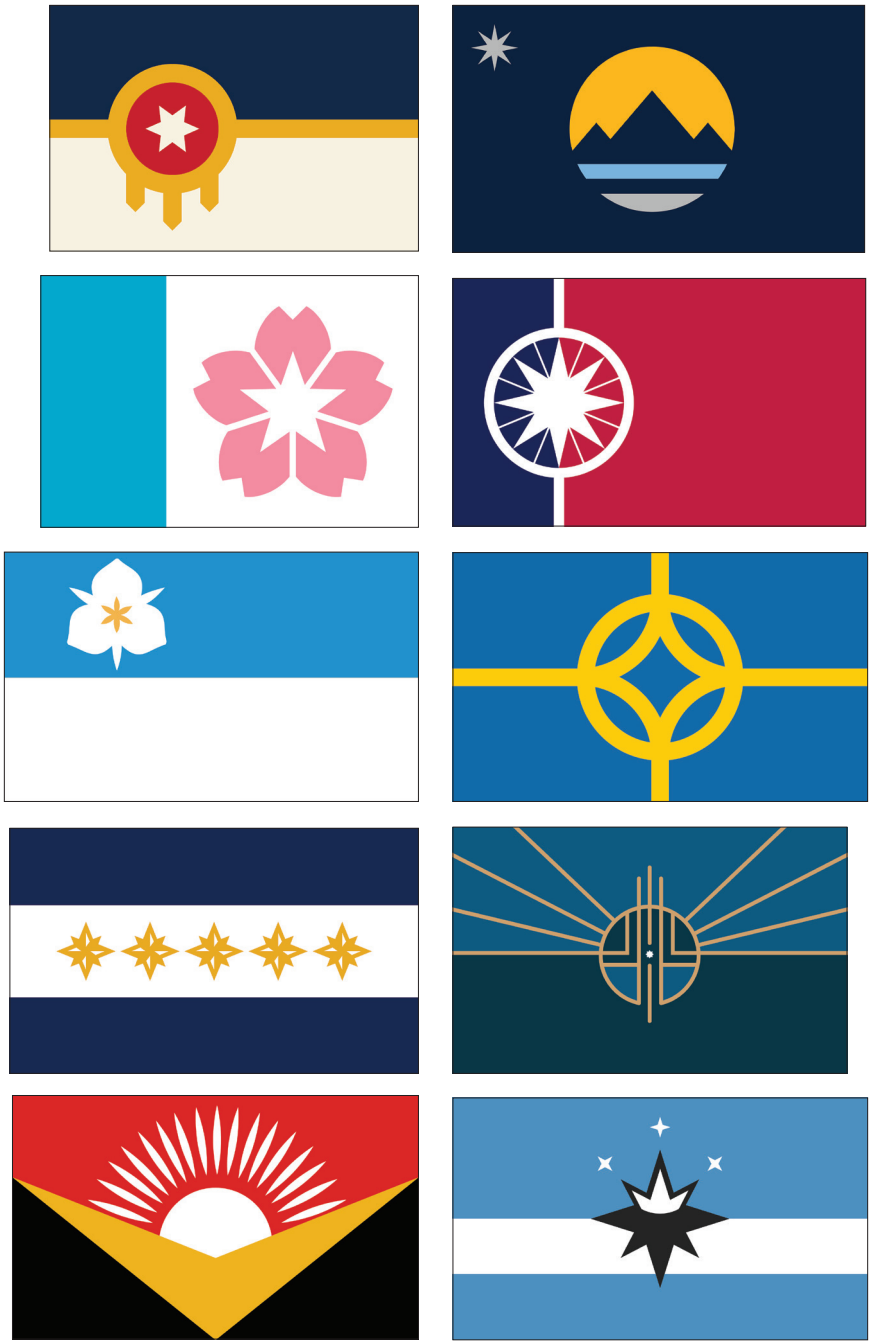


Figure 4. Top flags in the 2022 NAVA Survey of New American City Flags: Tulsa, Oklahoma; Reno, Nevada; Salem, Oregon; Norman, Oklahoma; Salt Lake City, Utah; West Plains, Missouri; Wheeling, West Virginia; Lincoln, Nebraska; Kingman, Kansas; Springfield, Missouri. (Wikimedia Commons)

3. **Use 2–3 Basic Colors.** Limit the number of colors on the flag to three, which contrast well and come from the standard color set.

4. **No Lettering or Seals.** Never use writing of any kind or an organization's seal.

5. **Be Distinctive or Be Related.** Avoid duplicating other flags, but use similarities to show connections.[6]

Kaye finds in the NAVA surveys a "powerful validation" of the principles.[7]

"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag states that its guidance will help a designer create a flag that "successfully" achieves the purpose of "representing a place, organization, or person, generally on a rectangular piece of cloth, to be seen at a distance, often moving, and reproduced in quantity and in many sizes."[8]

Within the ranks of NAVA, there has been debate over what it means to have a "successful" flag; a common definition is the one expressed by Peter Ansoff, who argues that a flag which is viewed positively within the community it is intended to represent, and which is widely used, should be considered successful.[9] He distinguishes judgment of "success" from judgment of aesthetic quality.[10] *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* provides guidance on creating flags that are likely to be accepted by vexillophiles, and anecdotal evidence suggests that flags that comply with its principles are likely to meet Ansoff's standard of "success". One informal rubric says that if residents of a place frequently get tattooed with its flag, then the flag's design has found widespread approval.[11] Places with highly-ranked flags, such as Chicago, Texas, and Washington, D.C., certainly have plenty of vexillologically-inked denizens.[12]

"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag provides high-level guidance for flag design. It is not concerned with technical details having to do with optimum visibility in all weather conditions, or durability of a particular design, which have been addressed elsewhere in the literature.[13] However, adherence to its principles will result in a flag that tends to do well on those measures.

Other standards such as those of the Joint Commission on Vexillographic Principles and the Heraldic Council of the President of the Russian Federation offer considerably more detail than *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* and make judging designs against their standards a complex task.[14]

Flag Images in Surveys Compared to Flags as Physical Objects

It should be noted that the presentation of flag designs in all the flag surveys is as an illustration, not a photograph (fig. 5). As numerous vexillologists have pointed out, there is a considerable difference between what Whitney Smith calls the ideal flag—as "conceived in the mind"—and physical specimens of the same design.[15] As Kaye notes, there is disagreement as to which "essential flag" is the object of study, the physical specimen (which may differ from writ-



	45	Montgomery	Ala.	4.76
	46	Topeka	Kan.	4.76
	47	Oakland	Calif.	4.74
	48	Shreveport	La.	4.74
	49	Fort Smith	Ark.	4.73
	50	Charleston	W. Va.	4.71

*Figure 5. A sample page from the report of NAVA's 2004 American city flags survey. (https://nava.org/digital-library/raven/*Raven_*v12_2005_p027-062.pdf)*

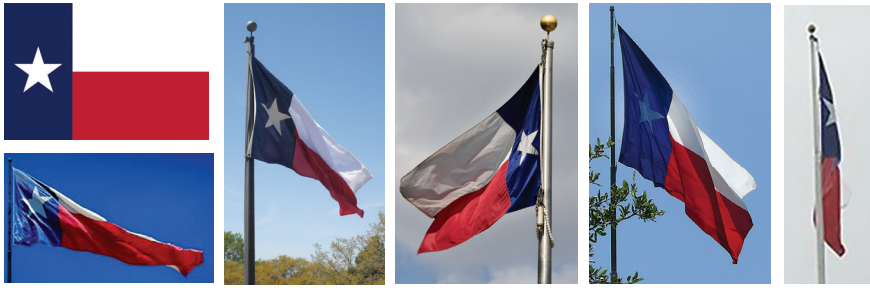


Figure 6. The 1839 sketch showing the ideal Texas flag, and its actual appearance in different weather conditions. (<www.tsl.texas.gov/>; <flickr.com/woggie3rd>; <flickr.com/Boldmar Flakne>; <flickr.com/parv_sheena>; <flickr.com/slinger65>; <flickr.com/Alan Kotok>; <flickr.com/drufisher>)

ten specifications) or the image as conceptualized by the designer.[16] Theun Okkerse observes that "flags are often displayed in print and online without an indication of the hoist, which… is assumed to lie to the left of the image", as they are in NAVA's surveys; however, the eye viewing a flying flag moves "from the flagpole outwards", not necessarily left to right.[17] Respondents to these surveys are judging a notional depiction of a flag design, and not actual pictures of rectangular cloths. In figure 6, it is shown that the appearance of flags under scrutiny will vary significantly in different weather conditions. This fact should be taken into consideration when it is reported that a "flag" is particularly highly ranked—the ranking usually applies to the two-dimensional unflapping rendition of a flag's schematic.

Psychological Scholarship about Preference in Visual Design

Kaye's 2001 survey confirmed his notion that flags whose designs accord with the principles in *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* will be popular—at least among vexillophiles. That earliest study of flag preferences is the most useful study of his proposition, because the principles had not been widely disseminated through the publication of the pamphlet nor the posting of the incredibly popular TED Talk on flag design by Roman Mars which embraces the guidelines (viewed more than five million times since 2015).[18] In 2001 a "naïve" audience unversed in the recommendations of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* still exhibited preferences for flags which conform to its principles.

There is a likely explanation for this expressed preference, found in the literature of cognitive psychology. An extensive body of research has investi-

gated what features of visual images are associated with aesthetic pleasure in the subjects of experiments. It should be noted that, like many of the published results in psychology, data are drawn from asking people who are part of the European-North American cultural zone. Studies show that many kinds of mental activity, including "visual perception can show substantial variation across populations".[19] So while many of the findings are generalizable among people belonging to the broad Western culture with its European-derived traditions related to art and imagery, they may not hold true for people from other cultures. As well, they assume normal vision, and it is known that certain kinds of visual impairment such as color blindness make distinguishing, and therefore judging, shapes and designs much more difficult.[20]

Philosophers of art suggest that a person's sense of beauty proceeds from initial sense perceptions through a moment of paying attention to an object and then considering the emotions it evokes.[21] Objects which evoke pleasure are judged as being well-made or well-designed. Psychologists have extended the discussion by examining which attributes of an image evoke aesthetic pleasure.

Studies show that the following features of graphics are correlated with positive aesthetic judgment:

- Images with less information; that is, simpler pictures
- Symmetrical patterns
- Images with high contrast between foreground and background
- Depictions of objects that are more prototypical; that is, the way an object is presented conforms to the most-often seen presentations of that object (it is not distorted or colored unusually)
- Colors that are saturated
- Elements of the image are situated in a context where the viewer is likely to have recognized them before

(These are average results for large groups of people; some people, of course, will have tastes that vary from the norm.) A likely explanation for these preferences is a phenomenon called processing fluency. Fluency is the speed and ease with which one can understand something. Processing fluency combines two related processes. The first is perceptual fluency, which is the ability to recognize an image and distinguish it from its surroundings.[22] The second is conceptual fluency, which is the ability to contextualize an image within one's

knowledge bank. Processing fluency influences aesthetic judgment; in a word, the easier it is to recognize and understand an image, the more a person likes it.

The literature around processing fluency confirms the predictive power of the guidelines in *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag.* Most of the guidelines are aimed at producing flags which can be fluently processed. "Keep It Simple" and "No Lettering or Seals" make it easier on the eye to spot the patterns; "Use 2 or 3 Basic Colors" practically guarantees high contrast and color saturation; and "Use Meaningful Symbolism" speaks to the concept that images the viewer can recognize are more fluently processed.

As well, these findings match the observations of earlier vexillologists, particularly Georges Pasch. He observed that flag designers and manufacturers limit their color palette, for the most part, to six basic colors: white, black, red, blue, green, and yellow, and theorized that those fundamental color choices were selected because "the human eye is designed to appreciate the simplest relations between provoked excitations" (that is, visual stimuli)—or, to put it another way, those colors are the most fluently processed choices.[23] He also noted that striped flags tend to limit the variance between stripe widths: they are typically all the same width, or have some stripes that are twice as wide as others; other combinations of stripe widths produce a "sense of uncertainty" which produces aesthetic displeasure; the difficulty of parsing stripes of uneven widths limits processing fluency.[24]

As well, the notion of processing fluency helps explain the "deal-breakers" of flag design (for the untutored public) identified by Brian Cham in his analysis of submissions for the 2015 New Zealand flag referendum (table 1). While many of the submissions may have, at first glance, complied with the five principles of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag"*, they still produced results that were not viewed favorably.[25] In each of the cases Cham outlines, there was something about the design that made it difficult for a novice to process. Even the problem of a design that is "too simple" inhibits processing because there is nothing to recognize, inhibiting conceptual fluency.

Findings about processing fluency's influence on aesthetic judgment hold true for non-experts in an art form. Those who have experience or expertise in music, art, or other forms tend to prefer more complex presentations and to seek to assess inputs according to culturally-transmitted ideas of "good" and "bad" taste.[26] People who have long been involved with flag design tend to produce more nuanced judgments of flags than do newcomers.[27]

Table 1: Brian Cham's "Deal-Breakers of Bad Flag Design"

DEAL-BREAKER	DISCUSSION
Looks Like a Logo, Not a Flag	"The public has a stylistic expectation of how a flag should look… When consulted, the public will reject anything which seems ephemeral, flashy, or overtly trendy".
Looks Like a Souvenir, Not a Flag	"Designs can induce a cringe and evoke contempt if they look too offbeat, informal, or 'un-flag-like' ".
Mystery Symbolism	"It's not enough for symbolism to be meaningful; it also has to be recognizable".
Designing for Yourself	"It's a mistake to focus on a single sector of society, or exclude alternate preferences or other themes".
Too Radical	"Delivering an entirely radical design excludes the people who prefer the familiar imagery that is embedded in their collective psyche".
It Works, but it's Boring	"A design that is too simple, however, may alienate members of the public who are expecting something more interesting".
Source: Brian Cham, "The Six Little-Known Deal Breakers of Bad Flag Design", *Vexillum* no. 19 (September 2022, 20–21.	

Genre in Flag Design

Of the five design principles in *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag*, four of them, as discussed earlier, are easily correlated to the observations of cognitive psychologists about the relationship between processing fluency and aesthetic judgment. The last "Be Distinct or Be Related" brings us out of cognitive psychology and into the realm of art theory.

To be sure, part of the reason "Be Distinct or Be Related" works is that flags which evoke other flags can trigger associations in the viewer's memory, easing conceptual fluency. But another, and possibly more powerful reason it works, is that vexillographers take advantage of the principle to place a flag within or beyond one of the genres of flag design.

The Idea of Genre

Genre can be thought of as a way of classifying creative works. It is often used in discussions of music—country music, R&B, heavy metal, each with its own multiple subgenres—and fiction—romance, whodunits, science fiction. Unlike classification of organisms, there are no morphological features that unambiguously distinguish the members of a genre of creative works from members of another; rather, genre is judged according to a complex of characteristics including formal features, the historical precedents for works





Figure 7. Bartolomeo della Porta (fra' Bartolomeo), Assunzione della Madonna con san Giovanni Battista e santa Caterina d'Alessandria, *1516; Bartolomeo Pinelli and Charles Joseph Hullmandel,* A Roman Beggar *(detail), 1820. (Artstor; Wellcome*

in a particular style, and most importantly, the claims of the creator. Genre is often a matter of stylistic detail, accompanied by recognition of the creator as someone working within the genre. To cite a musical example, in 1993 the song "I Swear" was a big hit on the country charts as sung by John Michael Montgomery, and a year later topped the R&B charts in a version by the group All-4-One. The melody and lyrics are identical, but the records vary in their instrumentation and in the harmonic arrangement. But primarily, Montgomery considers himself a country singer and his record was sold to country music fans; the same was true for All-4-One in the R&B genre.

Knowing that, as Whitney Smith said, "flags are artifacts conceived of and constructed by human beings interacting with their cultures", one can look for the role of genre in defining flag culture and therefore aesthetic judgment.[28] Judgment of genre is a matter of "discrimination and taxonomy" that arises from being a "member of a culture [that] knows how to make" distinctions—largely based on knowledge of prototypes that are commonly understood as typical of a genre.[29]

One of the functions of genre is to guide the audience in its understanding and expectations of the art. In literature, identifying the genre of a work helps the reader to know what to pay attention to: if it is a detective novel, the minute details demand attention as they will likely be important elements of the plot; in a psychological novel, the minute details provide the atmosphere but the reader's attention is on the state of mind of the characters. In visual mediums, the genre helps the viewer orient the images within the context of the scene.

An unclothed baby in a Renaissance religious painting signifies a supernatural being, while the same figure in a 19th-century realist work is more likely a recognition of the poverty of the subjects (figure 7). As H. G. Kippenberg notes, "If one wants to distinguish the correct interpretation from faulty interpretations, one must know for certain which genre that artist had in mind."[30]

An important factor in defining genre is whether the work is understood to be deliberately similar to known works in the genre. At times, the creator will explicitly identify the work as a "country song" or a "science fiction novel". In other instances, the work will offer allusions to earlier works. Often, the subject of the work defines a genre, as in murder mysteries. Sometimes, the main similarity between works is a shared style, a matter which will be returned to.[31]

Flag Genres Defined by Historical Links: Flag Families

When presented with the idea of genre, it's possible that many vexillologists first think of the concept of "flag families". The metaphor of a family of flags seems to have first appeared in print in the *Rotarian* magazine in 1971: "Flag families can be discerned, just as there are families of man."[32] The term "families of man" was introduced in 19th-century pseudoscientific proto-anthropological works seeking to classify human beings by race and subgroups called "families" such as the Teutonic Family, the Celtic Family, and the Indostanic [Hindustanic] Family.[33] The metaphor draws upon an understanding of a hereditary relationship between the physical features of the flags within a flag family. The implied historical relationship between these flags is, of course, one of the ways genre can be defined.

Prominent vexillologists, including Whitney Smith, William Crampton, and Alfred Znamierowski, have suggested lists of flag families (table 2).[34] In each, the members of the flag family are related by similarity of appearance, but necessarily also because the shared features are, in Znameriowski's words, an "expression of common history, traditions or interests, or it may be a statement that a country modelling its flag on that of another country sees that country as a religious or political role model".[35] Let us note that flag genres are not limited to national flags, as will be discussed later.

A commonly cited example of flag families are the "Pan-African Colors"—flags displaying the colors of red, yellow, and green (sometimes with black as well). The colors pay homage to the flag of Ethiopia, the one African kingdom

Table 2. Flag Families Suggested by Prominent Vexillologists

WHITNEY SMITH	WILLIAM CRAMPTON	ALFRED ZNAMERIOWSKI
Crusader Flags	Dutch *Prinsenvlag*	Christian Cross
France	British Red Ensign	Muslim Crescent
Arab Revolt	Stars and Stripes	Union Jack
Netherlands	French *Tricolore*	Stars and Stripes
Great Britain	Anarchist Flag	Dutch and Pan-Slav Colors
	Red Flag	French *Tricolore*
	Flag of Francisco de Miranda	Livery Colors
	Flag of Marcus Garvey	Pan-Arab Colors
	Arab Revolt Flag	Pan-African Colors
	United Provinces of Central America	Red Banner
		Francisco de Miranda's tricolor
	Rastafarian Flag	Manuel Belgrano's triband
	Egypt Liberation Movement	United Nations Flag

Source: Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World* (McGraw-Hill, 1975), 47, 136, 154–55, 163, 186; William Crampton, *The World of Flags* (Rand McNally, 1998), 20–21; William Crampton, *Ultimate Pocket Flags of the World* (DK, 1997), 5–7; Alfred Znamierowski, *The World Encyclopedia of Flags* (Hermes House, 2006), 106–29.

that remained uncolonized during the Scramble for Africa in the late 19th century (fig. 8), as well as to the flag of the Universal Negro Improvement Association led by Marcus Garvey, which advocated for independence of African colonies and empowerment of black people elsewhere (fig. 9).[36] Another feature that helps define this genre is the predominance of stripes, often vertical. This recalls the flag of France, from which many of the nations of west and central Africa gained independence. It may seem peculiar that a nation freeing itself from the shackles of colonization should use its flag to revive memories of its



Figure 8. A specimen of the Ethiopian flag dating from 1897. (Stanislaw Chojnacki, "Third Note on the History of the Ethiopian National Flag: The Discovery of Its First Exemplar and the New Documents on the Early Attempts by Emperor Menilek to Introduce the Flag", Rassegna di Studi Etiopici *28 (1980–1981): 41)*



Figure 9. Illustration of the unveiling of the flag of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1920. (Institute of the Black World 21st Century)

occupiers, but there is a sound political strategy. As Sasha Weitman notes, every independent nation adopts a flag almost as its first legislative act; this is necessary because a flag commands a certain amount of international respect.[37] Choosing a national flag modelled on that of one of the world's great powers asserted a claim to sovereignty on par with the nations of Europe (fig. 10).[38] An alternative perspective on the question of why vertical tricolors were chosen

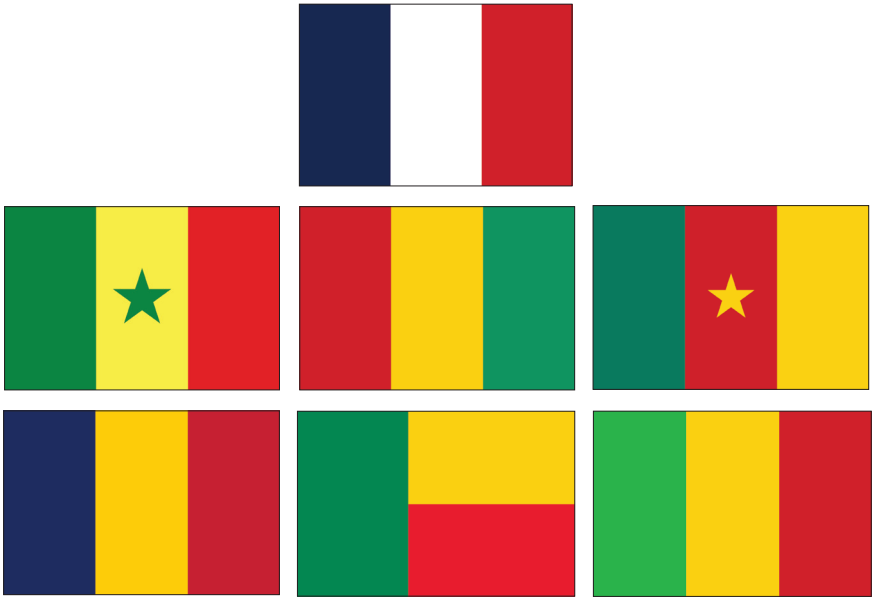


Figure 10. The flags of France and several flags in the Pan-African flag family: Senegal, Mali, Cameroon, Chad, Benin, and Guinea. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 11. The flags of Lithuania, Myanmar, and Bolivia. (Wikimedia Commons)

may be that this was simply the rubric the designers were most familiar with. As an example, the first president of Guinea, Sékou Touré, wrote a piece on the design of the Guinean flag in which he expounds at length on the choice of colors but makes no mention of the choice of vertical stripes.[39]

However, there are several world flags that are green, yellow, and red, yet no one lumps them into this genre—namely Lithuania, Myanmar, and Bolivia (fig. 11). The reason for this is that the motives for selecting the colors on those flags is not to call to mind Ethiopia or the UNIA; the historical links, and the claim to belong to the genre, are not present.

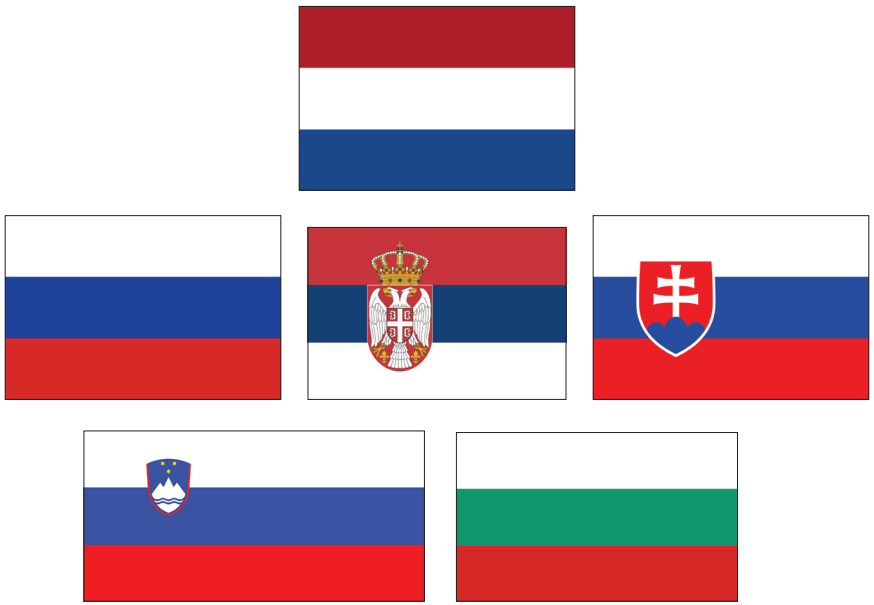


Figure 12. The flags of the Netherlands, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 13. Flags of central American nations: El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Costa Rica. (Wikimedia Commons)

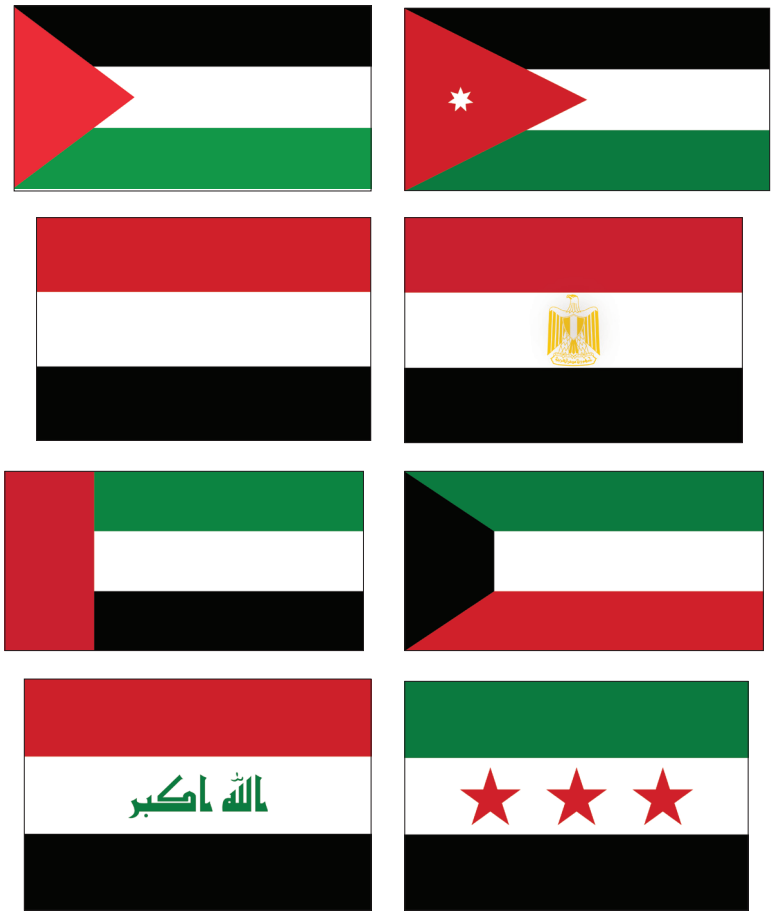


Figure 14. Flags of Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq, and Syria. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 15. Impressionist and Academic paintings of the same subject. Camille Pissarro, The Shepherdess*, 1881; William-Adolphe Bouguereau,* The Young Shepherdess*, 1885. (Artstor)*

The notion of flag families reinforces the idea that works in a genre may have direct historical linkages to previous designs. Don Healy traced the influence of the flag of the Netherlands through Russia (thanks to Peter the Great's sojourn in the Low Countries) to modern Slavic flags (fig. 12); through revolutionary France (who chose a striped flag in homage to Dutch republicanism) to many post-colonial tricolored flags; and several other "branches" on the flag family tree.[40] The same principle can be observed in flag families such as the Central American flags (fig. 13) or the Pan-Arab flags (fig. 14).

Genres Defined by Style

The flag families are one type of genre in flags. Another way of creating genre is to draw upon a shared artistic style. Style, for these purposes, can be thought of as the artistic techniques used to render an image. In all forms of art, "stylization is ubiquitous and likely quite unavoidable, because… the tools,

pigment and stylistic factors involved inevitably cause a deviation from the most acute natural appearance" of the objects depicted.[41] While any given artist or artisan has a personal style, it is also true and more relevant that within groups of artists there may be observed a "coherence of qualities" in the way the art is executed; that is, artists who work in a particular genre will tend to make things using similar techniques.[42] Style is the way John Michael Montgomery makes a microtonal dip before singing the beginning of a line, while the members of All-4-One deliver the line with melisma in the final notes. Style is the most important difference between Impressionist painting and the Academic painting to which it was contrasted by critics (fig. 15).

There are a number of genres in flag design that can be formulated by scrutinizing the style of a design. One sense of the term style is the way that flags are subdivided; when accompanied by knowledge of political motivations, there are flag genres based on subdivisions. One is the previously discussed use of vertical tricolors in former French colonies of Africa.

Another flag family is those with triangles in the hoist. The first such flag was Cuba's, which started as the flag of the Cuban independence movement; the triangle became the unifying feature among flags of anti-Spanish resistance movements which became official flags in Puerto Rico and the Philippines (fig. 16). After the 1959 Cuban revolution, the triangle saw a resurgence in popularity as a symbol of anti-Western sentiment among recently decolonized nations such as the Bahamas, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Sudan (fig. 17).[43] Similarly, the small family of horizontal bicolors with a central charge,



Figure 16. Flags of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 17. Flags of the Bahamas, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Sudan. (Wikimedia Commons)

including Angola and Burkina Faso, draw upon the flag of the Viet Cong as a banner of socialist anti-colonialism (fig. 18).[44]

Many flags of U.S. states and municipalities look quite similar, with the state or civic seal or arms presented often on a unicolored field; sometimes the field is divided with stripes, and often the name of the polity will also be inscribed (fig. 19). These flags are similarly rendered not in homage to a particular former flag (although there are links to the military flags used by state units in the U.S. Civil War or Spanish-American War), but as part of a shared



Figure 18. Flags of the Viet Cong, Angola, and Burkina Faso. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 19. Flags of Nebraska; New Hampshire; Nashville, Tennessee; Akron, Ohio; Bridgewater, Virginia; Kent County, Michigan. (Wikimedia Commons; Flags of the World)

tradition. Whitney Smith notes that, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, U.S. states and cities abandoned European-style heraldic symbols and "made a conscious attempt to relate the visual content of seals and arms to the life of everyday citizens", which is why so many of the seals feature assemblages of the instruments of agriculture, commerce, and learning.[45] The rendering of those objects also differs from the heraldic stylization of European flags, as will be discussed. While this genre is unpopular among vexillophiles, Nelson's research shows that 21% of Americans find this style to be the most favored type of municipal flag.[46]

Additional genres can be defined by style. One is the county flags of Liberia, the images of which are rendered in a style reminiscent of American quilting traditions (fig. 20).[47] Many of the flags of American Indian nations include symbols rendered in a style derived from pre-Columbian petroglyphs or carvings (fig. 21).[48] The most prominent style used in flags is the heraldic style.

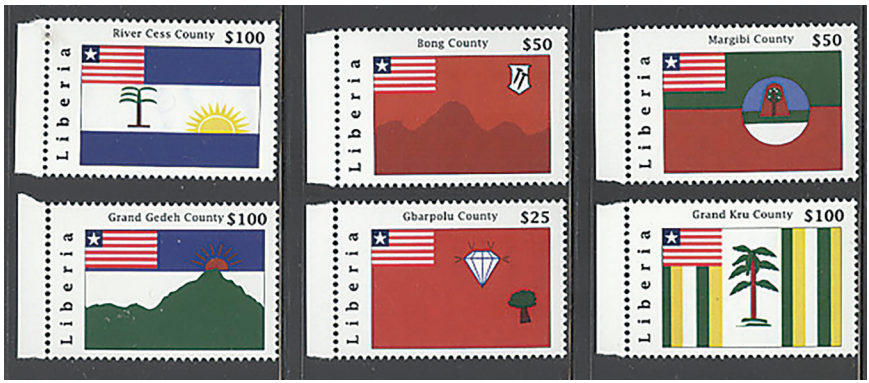


Figure 20. Portion of a sheet of postage stamps displaying the flags of Liberian counties. (<www.reddit.com/r/vexillology/comments/71uto9/liberian_county_flag_stamps/>)



Figure 21. Flags of the Ho-Chunk Nation; Iroquois Confederacy; Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe; Makah Indian Nation; Menominee Nation; Rosebud Sioux Tribe. (Hanoverflags.com; Wikimedia Commons; Trabalnationsmaps.com; Hanoverflags.com; Metroflags.com; Wikimedia Commons)

The modern flag-making tradition is traced by most scholars to the use of heraldic banners in medieval Europe; the heraldic banner is the transfer of the design from knight's shield to fabric, often square in shape. Among well-known flags that are heraldic banners are those of Maryland, Nova Scotia, and Amsterdam (fig. 22). More importantly, the style of heraldry is seen widely in flag design.

In some cases, this is because heraldic elements make their way into flags, such as the shields appearing on those of Slovakia and Slovenia (see fig. 12). However, it is more often so that the depiction of images on flags is rendered in the same way that arms often are. Heraldry arose as a battlefield necessity—armored warriors needed to be recognized even when their faces were covered. The painting of their shields had to be done so that the images were easily distinguished at a distance. This dictated the conventions that objects were to be simplified to their essential characteristics (fig. 23).



Figure 22. Flags of Maryland; Nova Scotia; Amsterdam; and the arms from which they are derived. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 23. Shields painted in a heraldic style. (<www.english-heritage.org.uk/guide-to-heraldry>)

Those essential characteristics were shape and orientation. Just enough of the shape of an object was to be preserved to distinguish it from similar objects, and all other detail was omitted. Perspective was eliminated and the angle of view was straight ahead. Compare, for example, a heraldic cross with an actual cross, a heraldic *fleur-de-lis* to an actual lily, or a heraldic crescent moon to the moon in the sky (fig. 24).



Figure 24. Heraldic depictions from an early 15th-century manuscript of a cross; crescent moons; fleurs-de-lis; and photos of the same objects. (Armorial de Gelre [Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Ms 15652–15656], ed. Michel Popoff and Michael Pastoureau [Léopard d'or, 2012], 619, 631; flickr.com/Lucian Ceh; flickr.com/Gareth Fish; wikimedia/Stan Shebs)



Figure 25. Flags of India; Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Vanuatu. (Wikimedia Commons)

The process of simplifying an object through its visual rendition, so that "only some of the visual elements usually ascribed to 'the natural world' are extracted" is known as "abstraction".[49] Abstraction can vary in the degree to which details are omitted, and the level of abstraction should be considered when developing the notion of a genre defined by style.

The heraldic style dominates flag design, even when the flags are not derived from arms. To take examples from around the world, India's wheel, Saudi Arabia's sword, Kenya's shield, and the boar's tusk of Vanuatu are all rendered as though they are heraldic charges (fig. 25). Because it is so dominant, it is difficult to say that one can call all the flags created using heraldic stylization a genre, but along with other factors, it may be considered one of the hallmarks of particular flag genres.

The Emergence of Flag Genres

As in other artistic mediums, the genres of flags are not fixed in number, nor is there a terminal date at which works stop being produced. However, the popularity often wanes over time. There are still polka bands, but none are likely to sell a million copies of a song, the way Joe Patek did with the "Beer Barrel Polka" in the 1940s.[50] Theorists of art suggest that the waning of a genre tends to occur when its practitioners reach its "limits"—which is to say, when it is believed by artists and/or its audience that there is nothing new

to be seen or heard from works in the style.[51] Unless you are an avid fan, there is a limit to how much excitement can be gained from listening to yet another polka. In certain domains such as fashion, newness is valued *per se* and new genres may emerge not only as a result of the waning of old ones but also due to practical and aesthetic imperatives to continually introduce different styles.

The emergence of new genres of flag are part of the artistic process. As the needs and interests of flag flyers change, so do the ways flags are designed. While evocation of other flags to mark membership within the flag family is a useful technique, it has its drawbacks. As Perry Dane notes, "each successive variation is that much less powerful and that much less bold".[52]

The diminished evocative power of a given genre provides impetus for the development of new forms; as Margaret Finch notes, "one of the most favorable moments for the entrance of the inventive artist occurs when there is a recognizable need for new beginnings because old traditions are clearly becoming outworn".[53]

In flag genres, Don Healy posited that the wave of tricolors adopted in the early years of the 1960s "led to a saturation of that particular design", as evidenced by the prevalence of diagonal stripes and triangles in flags of the late 1960s through the 1990s.[54] In American municipal flags, John Purcell noted in 2001 the "likely the favorite format for civic flags in the United States is an emblem on a plain field".[55] Today, a glance through the new flags of recent years will reveal the waning of the number of flags with seals, logos, and words, while showing the emergence of a new genre.[56]

The gradually diminishing number of flags with highly detailed charges does not mean they are in any sense becoming the minority. In the 2002 NAVA survey of recently adopted flags, more than 60% of the designs were ranked as a D or and F on a letter-grade scale, largely due to the presence of words, seals, or logos.[57] As Nelson's survey showed, there remains among the general public a slight preference for elaborately-designed flags. To place this finding within the context of the NAVA surveys, it should be noted that the study only offered representative samples of different styles of municipal flag, rather than asking respondents to rank all the designs in a specific category of flags.[58] Thus, respondents did not see how large is the number of sigillary flags compared to those of other design genres, the knowledge of which fact may have affected responses in the NAVA survey.





Figure 26. The flag of Minnesota and a map of the state. (Wikimedia Commons; gisgeography.com)

The Abstracted American Civic Flag Genre

One may call this genre "abstracted American civic" flags. The seals used on many older municipal flags often have geographic features, symbols of industry and agriculture, and historical allusions or allegories. This is in contrast to the largely arbitrary symbols used in the European heraldic tradition—there are no lions in Luxembourg. The new genre of American flags incorporates the heraldic style of abstraction, but taken to even further extremes than the classic heraldic style, and it applies that technique to the objects typically depicted in flags of the sigillary style.

Abstraction is used in the four flags originally cited by Professor Dane. The unusual shape in the hoist of Minnesota's flag is an abstract representation of a map of the state (fig. 26).[59] Maps are a well-known feature of municipal flags and seals in the U.S.; half of all the flags with maps described in Mason Kaye's study in 2001 were from North America.[60]

Cedar Rapids notes that "the blue represents the Cedar River. The green represents Mays Island and … green space …. The white represents our homes,

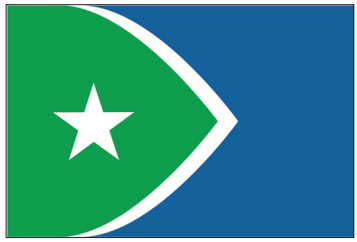




Figure 27 (left). The flag of Cedar Rapids. (Wikimedia Commons)
Figure 28 (right). The flag of Cedar Rapids, 1962–2021. (<www.thegazette.com/government-politics/cedar-rapids-new-city-flag-set-for-june-2020-unveiling/>)





Figure 29 (left). The flag of Evanston. (Wikimedia Commons)
Figure 30 (right). Logo of the City of Evanston. (https://nextrequestdev.s3.amazonaws.com/evanston/logos/medium/evanston_logo.png?1506174300)

businesses and infrastructure. The white arch represents forward progress and the city's future, as well as flood protection, which interacts with—and protects the community from—the river. The white star represents the historic structures built on Mays Island" (fig. 27).[61] A comparison to the city's former flag shows that most of the same objects were represented, but in a more realistic depiction (fig. 28).

Evanston's flag uses forest green for its trees, a white star for Grosse Point Lighthouse, and yellow and blue stripes to signify its beaches and Lake Michigan (fig. 29).[62] One can see the same objects represented in a different style in the city's logo (fig. 30), and in other flags with land- and sea-scapes (fig. 31).









Figure 31. Other flags with land- and sea-scapes: Long Beach, California (left), and Surfside, Florida, with details of the city seals. (Wikimedia Commons; Flags of the World)



Figure 32 The flag of Dayton. (Wikimedia Commons)





Figure 33 (left). Flag of Dayton, Ohio, 1958–2021. (Wikimedia Commons)
Figure 34 (right.. Flag of Dayton, Ohio, 1917–1958. (Wikimedia Commons)

In Dayton's flag, the white stripes are meant to stand for the wings of the Wright Flyer, the first airplane, whose designers hailed from Dayton. The fact that there are five angled stripes recalls the five rivers of the Dayton region (fig. 32). And, the city asserts, "bold lines and colors…showcase our reputation as the 'Gem City'" (a nickname for Dayton).[63] Again, it is instructive to compare this style of representing the Wright Brothers' invention to the way it was shown in the city's earlier flags (figs. 33 and 34).

In each of these examples, and many other recently adopted municipal flags in the U.S., a new way of representing communities has emerged. These flags retain the idea that, unlike flags in the European heraldic tradition, the objects depicted should have specific ties to the polity. However, they have been stylized using the conventions of heraldry, but going even farther in the direction of abstraction. In heraldic style, detail is left off but the basic outlines of an object are preserved. Berlin's flag is not a good representation of a bear, but it is definitely a bear; the Saxon swords of the English county of Essex are clearly swords (fig. 35).

In contrast, the identity of the abstracted images of recent American flags are not obvious to the unoriented viewer. Minnesota's map can be seen if you squint, but there's no reason to think that the stripes of Evanston are the beaches and lake, that the arch of Cedar Rapids is a seawall, or that the stripes of Dayton are the wings of an airplane—unless you've been told.

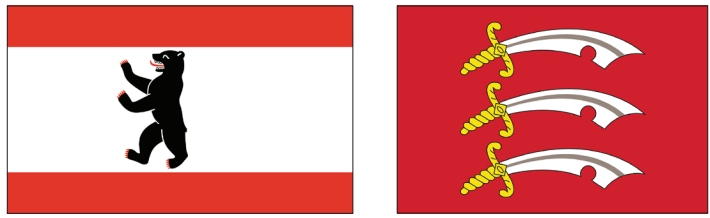


Figure 35. The flags of Berlin and Essex. (Wikimedia Commons)

Which brings us back to Perry Dane's notion that flags in this genre suffer from a "gimmicky sameness". It's not a gimmick in the sense of a trick, but the technique used in all these flags is abstraction *in extremis*—all the objects of the world are boiled down into a few rectangles, curves, or stars. The sameness results from the very limited palette of shapes afforded by this level of abstraction. A few more flags will serve to illustrate this. There are often stars—a flag design element that is "by far the most widely used" and therefore lacks obvious symbolism because it has been used so often by so many regimes.[64] Beyond that, recognizable objects are rare, and the flags are, for the most part, composed of basic shapes (fig. 36).

Variations occur that do include recognizable objects, such as Salt Lake City's sego lily or the cherry blossom of Salem, Oregon (see fig. 4).

The abstracted American civic flag certainly has precedents in older flags, such as Chicago or Indianapolis (see fig. 3). There is a difference, however, in the degree of abstraction. In Chicago, the blue stripes recall a very well-known

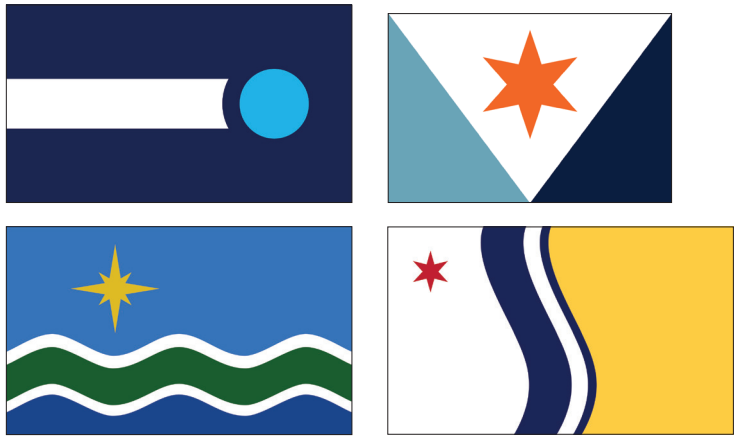


Figure 36. Clockwise from upper left: the flags of High Point, North Carolina; Syracuse, New York; Duluth, Minnesota; South Bend, Indiana. (Wikimedia Commons)

trope of map-making that light blue indicates water, and the North and South branches of the Chicago River are sufficiently familiar that their evocation by two light blue stripes is not such a stretch. Similarly, anyone familiar with the geography of Indianapolis will recognize the abstracted layout of its central rotary surrounding the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument.

It is a matter of taste whether one likes the look of these flags, and they clearly find favor among vexillophiles. In NAVA's 2022 survey of new city flags, almost all of the top-ranked flags are part of this genre (fig. 37).

To return to Dane's point, it is probably pejorative to use the adjective "gimmicky" to describe a widely used design technique that has clearly found favor among its audience. And sameness is another way of saying an image is part of a genre. It seems that what Dane is really saying is that he doesn't like this genre, for the most part (although he does single out Minnesota for praise). This is little different than saying, "On the whole I don't care for polka, but I am fond of 'In Heaven There is No Beer'".



Figure 37. Results of NAVA's 2022 "New American City Flags" Survey. (https://nava.org/2022-survey)

There is one part of Dane's critique that requires exploration. Dane traces the rise of the abstracted American civic flag genre to the widespread distribution of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag*. While it is true that the publication of the guidelines was followed by the rise of this genre, there is a most complicated story. After all, the examples favorably cited in *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* come from a number of genres, from the republican vertical tribar to armorial banners. If the design principles of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* were the only driver of design ideas, new American flags would be more diverse. In addition to changing ideas in design, there is also a change in behavior related to the intersection of artistic taste and social aspiration.

Taste and Social Aspiration in the Vexillological Community

When NAVA asks vexillophiles to judge flags, they are implicitly asking, "which flags do you like?" And the answer to that question is a matter of taste.

Philosophers since Immanuel Kant in the 18th century have identified two aspects to the discernment of taste. There is the subjective question of whether the art brings aesthetic pleasure. In that matter, it is commonly asserted that there can be no dispute over whether an individual likes something. However, there is also a question of normativity in taste: "In many cases, in matters of taste and beauty, we think that others ought to share our judgment, and we blame them if they don't", as Nick Zangwill summarizes the phenomenon.[65]

In surveys, the subjective question of taste in flag design is easy to find, as people clearly state their preferences. The normative aspect of taste only comes out in forums where opinions may be expressed at greater length. A sampling from the subreddit r/vexillology may serve to demonstrate:

- Regarding the decision of the authorities in Illinois to preserve the current flag: "I absolutely despise our current flag. In my opinion, it's ugly, bland, and lazy. … there were so many designs that were far better than the current one…. Words cannot describe my disappointment.[66]

- On the flag of Delaware: "Pretty shit tbh. Who in their right mind would wanna fly this anywhere".[67]

- "Why did Kansas and Vermont both get rid of their original good flags and replace them for the typical blue background with a seal? Are they stupid?"[68]

The demand for normativity suggests that taste is as much of a social phenomenon as an internal sense. This line of thought has been explored by a number of researchers. Among the most prominent was Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu notes that in most societies there is a distinction among genres that associates tastes for certain kinds of art and entertainment with different social classes. Consumption of particular genres requires training, as "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence" to understand, for example, the subtleties of opera or literary fiction.[69]

To grossly simplify Bourdieu's work, expression of taste becomes a signifier of social class, or aspiration. To be seen enjoying a particular kind of art or music is to claim membership in the class of people who like that kind of art. In Bourdieu's study of the French, those who enjoy the music of J. S. Bach are the same people who enjoy visiting the Modern Art Museum; they are members of the upper class. Those who prefer popular singers and traditional art belong to the bourgeois class.[70] And one way the upper classes both signal and secure their place in society is to provide normative judgments about taste through media and the schools.

Later researchers investigated whether Bourdieu's findings would transfer to an American context. Richard Peterson found that the markers of the upper class were not *exclusivity* in taste but *omnivorousness*. That is, upper class people, and only them, enjoy the high status genres, but a marker of the upper class is openness to a wide variety of genres. The lower classes, in contrast, are more likely to reject the upper class-coded genres and assert strong preferences for lower class-coded genres.[71] This finding ties to the studies of processing fluency which showed that people with more expertise in an art form—which is often gained through years of education or leisure-time pursuit that is available to the upper class—are comfortable with more complex art forms.

Extending Peterson's findings are Jean-François Nault and colleagues, whose study shows that there is variance of preference even within the genres favored by those of the upper class or seeking to be seen as such.[72] The expressed tastes of the highest status people are in favor of works that Bourdieu called "consecrated", meaning that there was a cultural consensus that a work was among the best of its kind. Even a person whose tastes in genres was omnivorous,

who equally enjoyed country, chamber music, and rock, tends to favor those country songs that are critically lauded.

Taste in Flag Design

Bourdieu and those who work in his line have been concerned with those whose status is defined through traditional markers of wealth and occupation. In the vexillological community, those markers are not easily observed. Most communication occurs online or through publications. For newcomers to the field who are seeking to align their tastes with various genres of flag design, they must turn elsewhere to learn which forms of cultural consumption signify a higher status.

In online or academic communities, status is marked mostly by expertise, which "significantly influence participants' perceptions of social status".[73] Alignment with expert opinion in scholarly communities is an important way to signal that one's taste is affiliated with the normative taste that is a marker of one's standing in a community, to tie the findings of Nault and colleagues into the realm of vexillology.

Another strategy for gaining authority in an intellectual community—open disagreement with opinions widely held in high regard—is also to be seen in these discourse communities.[74] In many cases, the five principles of flag design from *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* are attacked as too restrictive. Others, such as Dane and John Hartvigsen, find value in flag design genres whose styles are necessarily at odds with *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag*, such as sigillary flags.[75]

Taste-Making and the Abstracted American Civic Flag Genre

The story of the new genre of abstracted American civic flags can be told through the lens of taste and status. In the year 2000, there were a number of people promulgating ideas about flag design, but all had been limited in their reach. The flag survey of 2001, and the subsequent press coverage coordinated by NAVA, publicized the guidelines of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* to a much broader audience.

By virtue of the guidelines reflecting accurately the preferences in visual images that have been confirmed through cognitive psychology, the guidelines proved to be an accurate predictor of the types of flags that would be highly

rated by vexillophiles. By coincidence of tradition, the flags that were highly rated also tended to be rendered in the heraldic style.

While it does not do so now, in the early 2000s NAVA billed itself as "the flag experts of the U.S. and Canada.[76] It was only natural to assume that the guidelines of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* were those of the experts in the field. For those becoming interested in flag design, or seeking to assert their status within the community, alignment with expert opinion meant embracing the heraldic style in flag design. If the experts "consecrate" New Mexico, Texas, and Québec, then those are the flags that high-status vexillophiles will like.

So far, this account tracks the decline in status of the sigillary or textual flags that were popular in the 20th century. The rise of the new abstracted genre can be chalked up to the known phenomenon that highly proficient consumers of an art form enjoy more complex or difficult works. Ability to understand and appreciate works that people with less training find difficult or even unpleasant is among the markers of high status.

In the case of flags, abstracted flag designs are difficult. Although the actual shapes are very simple, the ability to recognize, say, an Osage war shield in the circle and pointed lines of Tulsa's flag requires a level of reasoning and, likely, prior training in abstract art that are not available to every citizen (fig. 38). The use of allusion demands prior knowledge on the part of the audience to be an effective form of communication, and the more abstruse the allusion, the fewer the number of people who will recognize it. Making and enjoying a flag in this genre marks one as an expert-level vexillographer, as much as enjoying the music of Frank Zappa marks one as an expert-level connoisseur of rock music.

One explanation, then, is that the emergence of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* guidelines along with a small set of consecrated flag designs that used heraldic



Figure 38. The flag of Oklahoma, source of the Osage war shield which is abstracted in the flag of Tulsa. (Wikimedia Commons)

stylization, was the starting point of a new genre of flag design. As the online vexillological community grew, normative taste judgments coalesced around the five principles of flag design. And those seeking to join the ranks of expert vexillographers and vexillophiles produced and enjoyed works of ever more complexity and difficulty, in which heraldic styling was taken to the point where objects are basically unrecognizable to those without expert knowledge.

This class of vexillophiles fills the ranks of flag designers, consultants, and judges. As cities undertake the effort to choose new flags, expert opinion coalesces around a particular style and the cycle continues. While many city administrators and everyday citizens are usually involved in these processes, they tend to defer to those who assert advanced knowledge and sophisticated taste in flags, just as would laypeople choosing the contents of a municipal art museum. As with all genres, abstracted American civic flag design will last until it has ceased to meet the needs of its creators and audience.

Conclusion

Perry Dane challenged vexillologists to seek out "an aesthetic theory of flag design". Aesthetics have something to do with flag design, but so do cognitive perceptions, historical notions of genre, and social signalling. In the particular case of abstracted American civic flags, each of these phenomena have exerted an influence on what many vexillographers and vexillophiles prefer in flag design.

It's widely believed that taste in flag design is necessarily personal and subjective. However, for the majority who are untrained in flag design, there are certain preferences in art for simplicity, contrast, and prototypicality. These preferences align with the guidelines espoused in *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag*.

Flag designs often can be defined as part of a genre. Flag families typically are genres defined by drawing upon a perceived shared historical source and major color schemes or important charges. However, as in other artforms, genre can also be defined by the stylization used to create a flag. A recently developed genre of flag design is "abstracted American civic flags", which draw upon the American tradition of representing objects of local significance, but stylizing them beyond recognizability for the uninitiated observer.

For those who seek to exhibit status through expertise in flags, advocacy of the design guidelines of *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* is one way of sharing nor-

mative tastes with those of high status within the world of vexillography. Cultural critics have observed that preference for difficult art forms, and for the most revered works in lower-status art forms, is a marker of high status. The development of the abstracted American civic flag genre is a natural consequence of vexillographers seeking to exert their expertise through adapted the "consecrated" styles of beloved flags that conform to *"Good" Flag, "Bad" Flag* guidelines while pulling the field toward more an abstruse design paradigm that requires the intervention of knowledgeable vexillologists and therefore confers upon those vexillophiles higher status.

Acknowledgments

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