



# The ARMIGER'S News

## PROPORTIONS

Anthony Wood (1925-2022), NDD, FHS, FSSI, FSHA

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[Editor's note: This current edition is not intended as a primer on heraldry. Far too many better-qualified authors have already tackled such matters on numerous occasions over the centuries. However, the late Anthony Wood's writings on the actual "nuts and bolts" of heraldic design, especially in his excellent work *Heraldic Art & Design*,<sup>†</sup> serve as a practical and guiding resource for the design of new Armorial Bearings when aiding potential Armorists with their Achievements. Of course, every heraldic artist has his or her own unique style, and none are "mandated" to follow the guidelines set forth in Wood's writings or examples – nor should they be. However, Anthony's brilliant essay on the subject of design proportions, which he graciously allowed the College to publish in its modest quarterly, is of essential reading to those seeking to develop their own Armorial Bearings.]

**ONE OF THE MORE PERTINENT CRITICISMS** which can be made of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century heraldic art is that so much of it is badly proportioned. If this is so, then how do we tell for instance if a helm or mantling or shield are out of proportion within an achievement? At first sight this would appear to be fairly obvious. As an English Professor of Philosophy once said, 'It all depends on what you mean by proportions.' The relative sizes of the shield and helm and crest were probably unconsciously decided by those of the actual ones which must from the mid twelfth century onwards, have been a fairly common sight. Over the years the size of the shield shrank from being from shoulder to knee high in the thirteenth century to being barely more than two feet high, as the design of armour progressed and became ever more efficient. By the late fifteenth century, armour was so efficient that shields were no longer needed by the knights and carried in action and shields were then used only for jousting or parade. Some were scarcely more than twelve inches high, heavily concave, and bolted or laced on to an extended and reinforced piece of plate called a grandguard, protecting the jousting's left arm.



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Although the helm has changed considerably in design and to some extent size, ~ the amount it can change is obviously limited by it having to accommodate, at least in theory, a human head. So, the relative sizes of the helm and shield were governed ~ largely by purely practical considerations. The helm remained more or less the same general size, but the shield decreased by a considerable amount. However, from the mid seventeenth century onwards, as full armour was made redundant by the development of the gun, it was never a familiar sight again and heraldic 'artists' began increasingly to draw the parts of an achievement by copying, often very badly, what had been done before and had become institutionally conventional.

In some armorial directories of the late eighteenth century, the shield was not only highly decorative, with cartouche like edges of increasing complexity, but had grown to a size, relative to the rest of the achievement to the point where the owner, assuming that he could actually get his head into his helmet, would have been physically unable to lift it off the ground. In order for each individual arms to be big enough to be recognised at any distance, shields like that of Lloyd of Stockton-in-Chirbury containing so many quarterings, (three hundred and fifty-six), would have been so big as to protect perhaps an entire house, the armiger presumably grasping the top of it from his bedroom window.

This disparity was not the outcome of natural progression, but the result of being drawn by 'artists, with little ability as draughtsmen. Anyone who attends a life class in Art School, finds that one of the first skills one has to develop, is to be able to judge the relative proportions and angles of the various parts of the naked human body.

It is one probably the most difficult disciplines to learn, but also one of the most important because no drawing can ever be good without relative proportions be accurately reproduced. It is also necessary to learn to interpret and reproduce planes which change subtly from one part of the anatomy to another. He or she learns to recognise when he has drawn the head of the model twice as large or twice as small as it is in reality and to correct the drawing accordingly.

This produces an interesting anomaly in that when a human figure is required in heraldry, either as a charge or as a supporter, it is never acceptable to draw it with feet, arms or head greatly out of proportion to the rest of the body. This could be the result of an emotional response. The human figure is one which everyone sees the most. Inevitably it is intensely personal because it strikes chords in oneself and causes immediate concern or a feeling of discomfort, however morally misguided, to see someone who is physically seriously deformed or distorted in some way, never knowing whether to look or to look away, or try to ignore it. With the increasing attention and importance people give to their external appearance, even to the extent of having serious invasive surgery to make radical alterations and 'correct' what they consider to be nature's mistakes, such distortions are likely to become even less likely to be acceptable heraldically.

Alternately, it may be because over the last three centuries, supporters have been granted which are of people in a variety of costumes and uniforms, many of them military. In such cases, the armiger to whom the supporters are being granted will be meticulous about the accuracy of the uniform concerned. That of a particular Regiment of Foot will obviously look less than dignified if the figure has hands or head or legs which badly are out of proportion. But such figures have of necessity to be out of proportion in real terms to the rest of the achievement, otherwise they would be far too big in scale. The supporters on some of the early Garter Stall Plates in St. George's Chapel at Windsor were small compared with the shield they supported as though there was some doubt as to their heraldic acceptability.

When the artist is required to draw a lion or other heraldic creature, real or imaginary, particularly if it is a charge on the shield, he will, indeed should without hesitation, lengthen one leg, or the tail, or attenuate the body until it fills the available space. It is because post fifteenth century artists approached their work with less and less of this visual freedom being apparent, that heraldic art eventually displayed a mechanical character which was to blight it for so many centuries. The leopards of England were reduced to three identical images occupying what is in effect a very wide pale down the centre of the arms with no attempt being made to allow them to fill their allotted space. Nevertheless, the artist is still under certain restraints. If he draws a lion with one of its limbs bending the wrong way or coming out of the small of its back, it would not be acceptable because it would look unnatural and destroy the illusion of the lion being a living breathing creature. It would have much the same sort of effect on the viewer as seeing someone with a serious disfigurement.

How is he to reconcile natural forms with stylised ones, many of which have in effect become ciphers? There is a school of thought, supported by several heraldic artists who are or have also been fine artists of considerable ability, that all the various aspects of the heraldic entity should be reduced entirely to symbolism, with little regard being paid to representational art. This will of course reinforce that the assumption which has been made for several centuries that 'anyone can do it' because on this basis they probably can. However, it will undoubtedly ensure that all the work produced thereby will all possess a sameness in appearance and become progressively more boring and unimaginative. One of the great joys to the artist is being able to play in his imagination with all the various styles and treatments throughout history which are available to him.

With some creatures it is essential to be completely accurate in portraying them. When arms were granted to Unigate, a merger of Cow and Gate Foods with Lever Brothers in the nineteen fifties, Gerald Cobb, then chief Herald Painter at the College Arms in London, had to portray a Guernsey cow and Jersey cow, one as a charge and the other as supporter. His first version of the arms was unacceptable to the Board of Directors of Unigate because the cattle were not technically sufficiently accurate. He was obliged to draw both animals from life and do the work again before he could satisfy the clients.

The portrayal of heraldic monsters provides the heraldic artist with another challenge. A Gryphon is made up of the top half of an eagle with ears and the bottom half of a lion. In reality the two species are so different in size that such a union would be impossible from a physical point of view, let alone a genetic one. But if the two are drawn in a suitable proportion to one another, it can be done so convincingly, particularly if the general features and eyes of the eagle are as life like as possible. Some monsters defy all attempts to make them in any way credible, the Calygreyhound, badge of the de Vere, Earls of Oxford being one and the Caretyne, badge of Sir Francis Bryan being another. Meat dishes prepared for the most elaborate mediaeval banquets the cooks sometimes created 'monsters' for instance, by sewing together the rear end of a piglet to the front end of a large bird, feathers

and all, the whole elaborately decorated on the dish to titillate the palates of the important guests and provide a topic of conversation.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century helms of whatever rank, are distinguished by their shapes and proportions being ones which in reality would defy any armiger actually to get his head into one. The gentleman's helm, so popular in the late Victorian period, based apparently on that of a classical Roman helmet, could only have been worn by Donald Duck. More recent helms based on late fifteenth century tilting helms are frequently drawn with no understanding of their construction or use, with an occularium so far above the base as to demand that the wearer be giraffe necked and closed to the extent that the knight could not actually see anything while wearing it. Several royal arms have a whole ring of up to nine helms arranged across the top of the shield, each with its crest and mantling. Presumably these are the helms of the members of the family needed to hold the shield up.

Helms are often drawn with a base which is so wide that it would effectually not only cover the neck but the shoulders as well, giving the unfortunate impression if it had actually been made like that, of the head being served up on a platter. Whether the helm be a tilting helm, barred Peer's tournament helm, Knight's close helm or a great helm or bascinet, it must be drawn with sound proportions and at least some awareness of why it is that shape it is and how it was made, and above all, whether anyone with a normal physiognomy could actually wear it. Although mediaeval helms were mostly drawn with a twisted perspective, the occularium facing in a different direction to the jewelled base, they were drawn in the sight of real helms and with a familiarity which comes from it.

In the arms of some European Royal families in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as many as nine helms might be included arranged in an arc around the top of the shield. These would either have to be for persons with very small heads, a not wholly fantastic notion, or be set above a shield too large to be physically wielded. Such absurdities would never have been conceived when heraldry was a living art form.

What of mantling? When well designed and rendered it can greatly increase the richness and decorative qualities of an achievement. It can vary from being very simple, just a short cloth hanging down from the wreath, cap of estate or crest coronet and ragged along its edges, a direct influence of popular fourteenth and fifteenth century civilian fashion, or it can be full, flowing, modelled on the most elaborate acanthus leaf architectural carving.

But which ever its origins, it must be drawn in a realistic proportion to the helm from which it flows. In some seventeenth century mantlings, they became so massive that wearer of the helm could not even have stood up, let alone actually move about. The lambrequin was made of cloth. From the late fifteenth century onwards, there was an increasing influence exerted by classical acanthus leaf decoration, some of which still survives, but it should always reflect the fact that it is cloth. Late Victorian mantling looked like and is even now sometimes mistaken for seaweed. The lambrequin should enhance the appearance of the achievement, not swamp it. Making part of a mantling much bigger and out of scale to the rest of it is not an acceptable way of filling an undesirable gap somewhere in the design, usually near the base of the shield. Each part must remain in proportion to the rest.

One of the heraldic entities most often distorted is of course the lion. Its legs can be made of varying length, or its body stretched as though elastic, in order to enable it to fill adequately its allotted space, a feature which died out completely from the mid sixteenth century until the mid twentieth. What of proportions here? Although the lion has for so long become an heraldic cliché, perhaps this ability to change shape and proportions so easily is not as far from reality as at first appear it might appear. Anyone who has shared the home with a domestic cat will know all too well that it can change from being a ball of fur hardly bigger than a tennis ball to extending from one side of a double bed to the other with no effort. The need to extend a lion's body to the point where one might be forgiven for assuming that it is made of rubber has often been brought about by the poor proportions of the field on which it must reside.

The English Royal Standard is case in point. Apart from the fact that the flag is not technically a standard but a banner, it is unfortunate that it was considered necessary to abandon the late mediaeval proportions of the flag being more or less square and increase its length to around double that of its depth. The quarters obtained thereby are so wide that it is almost impossible to fit the respective arms of England, Scotland, and Ireland into them with any visual conviction. That apart, it has been found by experiment that a square flag flies better and is much less likely to wrap itself around the pole in a stronger wind than any other shape, a fact well known to those who actually carried banners in the field when they needed to make their presence known to their followers.

The proportions of crests are quite another matter. In the late fifteenth century, it was the fashion in many arms, particularly those on the Garter Stall Plates, to follow the German fashion and make them large. With some crests this was a gift to the artist, because a crest could be given life, movement and greatly added emphasis if it could be to some extent be exaggerated. However, what a crest consisted of can cause insuperable problems for the artist. For instance, the arms adopted by the Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors of the town of Crewe before the first World War, and it must be stated in all fairness that they were certainly not granted, bear the crest of a locomotive steam engine and tender. The wreath contained nine twists and was extended to around two feet out from either side of the helm. On it was a sizable chunk of track which one sincerely hopes was taken from a siding rather than the main line out of Crewe, on which to place it. The 'arms' consisted of four quarters between them, seven horses, ten men, one woman, a stagecoach, a canal barge, a canal, towing path, a road, two ranges of mountains, four trees and incidental surroundings. The motto 'Never behind' which anyone using Crewe station was the final insult, it being one of the most inefficient and time-wasting junctions in the British railway system. To the great relief of all concerned and heraldists in particular, proper arms were granted to the Borough on 18th March 1955.

If the engine and tender had been contained on a normal sized wreath, it would have been too small to be recognised except under a magnifying glass. But although this is obviously an absurd example of pictorial heraldry concocted by people totally ignorant of heraldry, there are examples of crests which are heraldically quite acceptable, but which for the same reasons present the artists with a problem. For instance, the crest granted to Dr John Lancaster is a case in point. It is a lion sejant gules, grasping in its dexter paw a rose also gules, slipped and leaved or, sitting on a cap of estate or, turned up ermine. This is perfectly reasonable heraldic crest to which no technical objection could be made, but if the lion is drawn strictly within the confines of the crown of the cap of estate, it will inevitably be too small and out of proportion to the rest of the achievement. In this case the artist has to cheat and enlarge the lion, draping its paws over the sides and back of the cap and making the cap wider than would actually fit the crown of the helm.

Finally, there are of course mottos. These can be either on a scroll or not as the case may be. Providing a motto is of a reasonable length, this provides no great problem, but even then, to make the scroll on which it is lettered large enough for the motto to be read easily, the size of the scroll has in relationship to the shield above it, to be the equivalent of twelve inches or more deep. This size is obviously quite out of scale with what the actual physical size of the shield would be, but if it is not that large, the motto will be too small to be read comfortably on a painting. Some mottos are so long that to place them on a ribbon or scroll prompts the artist to consider alternatives. That of the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths of the City of London is *By hammer and hand all arts do stand*. This is about as long as one can be without raising design problems. That adopted by the late Cedric Holyoak, *A myry iuele my privy perle withouten spotte*. (Taken from a Saxon poem), was just too long for comfort, and is what might be termed a three-volume novel with regard to mottos. When asked to make a painting of his arms, I wrote it underneath as a piece in its own right. A scroll long enough to accommodate it, would have been too prominent for the rest of the achievement.

So, the term 'proportions' can mean many different things. It is no idle exercise for the heraldic artist to ponder on what these various meanings amount to regarding his work.

<sup>†</sup> Wood, Anthony. **Heraldic Art and Design**. *Sharw & Sons Ltd (January 1, 1996), ISBN 978-0721914602.*

In addition to **Heraldic Art and Design**, Wood was co-author of **A European Armorial** (1971), a 15<sup>th</sup> century list of all the members of a new Order of Chivalry — l'Armorial Équestre de la Toison d'Or, founded by Philip of Burgundy — to rival that of the Order of the Garter. His artwork has most notably appeared in Carl-Alexander von Volborth's **The Art of Heraldry** (1987); in Stephen Friar's **A Dictionary of Heraldry** (1987), along with his fellow artist, the late John Ferguson; and he was the principal contributor of the articles on the artistic aspects of heraldry in **The New Dictionary of Heraldry** (Stephen Friar, Ed.) Having trained (and later taught) as a professional calligrapher, illuminator, and heraldic artist, for many years he emblazoned Armorial Bearings for various Officers at the College of Arms. Wood is the only artist to have been elected a Fellow of both the Heraldry Society, and the Society of Scribes and Illuminators of London. Though no longer actively practicing his craft, Anthony Wood remained a highly respected President and Fellow of the Society of Heraldic Arts until his passing in February 2022.