



KEEP IT SIMPLE

SOME ADVICE FOR THE POTENTIAL ARMIGER

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[Editor's note: Neither I nor the College are the be-all, end-all resource for all matters heraldic. In fact, compared to longstanding European Granting bodies, we remain in our infancy. But we do our best to follow the guidelines and traditions set forth by those entities (see p. 74), and so it is in that spirit that we offer these words of advice to potential armigers.]

Many persons, unacquainted with heraldry, experience great difficulty in ascertaining their proper family-arms; and very often, no doubt, those who are fairly entitled to hereditary coat-armour are induced to assume any bearing belonging to their name, however mistaken, it may be, because it has been assigned to them by some coach painter, seal cutter, or engraver. By these means, there must be numerous instances in which gentlemen exhibit on their carriages, their seals and their plate, arms, with their crests and mottoes, which appertain to different families, although of the same name. This is, in fact, a very common abuse of an useful object, in this country; and an error into which persons entitled to hereditary coat-armour are too often inadvertently led.

Every man, therefore, who holds a respectable standing in society must be desirous not only of avoiding, in the first instance, mistakes of this nature; but of having them rectified, as speedily and as far as possible, after it shall be discovered that they have been actually committed. Because, independently of the consideration, that no person of reputable character would wish to use, and thereby probably perpetuate in his family, any armorial insignia, which might evidently appear to be the right of another – every abuse of this sort tends to diminish the usefulness of coat-armour, in an important particular: – it thus loses its aptitude to serve as a permanent badge of discrimination between families of different lineage bearing the same name; and it also ceases to be an useful mean of determining the rights of inheritable property, in cases of descent.

– William Barton, Esq., 1814

KEEP IT SIMPLE. More on that in a moment...

As most readers will already know, there is no official US Government entity which regulates the registration of assumed Arms in this country, and a potential armiger is under no demand to even take that entirely voluntary step to register the aforementioned assumed Arms. However, The American College of Heraldry strives to ensure that all Arms designed by and Registered with our organization meet international “standards,” conforming to the basic laws and tenets of heraldry set out centuries ago.

Some individuals come to the College with pre-designed Armorial Bearings that already meet these guidelines. Others come to us with brilliant designs at one degree of “completeness” or another, though the overall design may be either far too complex to “work,” heraldically speaking, or one or more facets of the design may violate some of the “standards” previously mentioned. And finally, some 50% of our Registration applicants have no idea whatsoever what they want to register – only that they DO want to design and register Armorial Bearings.

As to the Arms themselves, if an applicant already has a design which they wish to register, we ask that they forward it to us by email so that we may review it for suitability. We only ask that they keep one credo in mind when designing their own Arms – **KEEP IT SIMPLE.**

An oft-asked question is: “But how can I display all of my interests if I don't include something for each one of them? I'm in the army, I like reading, I ride horses, I'm really into birdwatching, my ancestry is Hungarian and Danish, and I have 12 children. I need to show all of that in my Coat of Arms.” *No, you don't*

KEEP IT SIMPLE. Don't over-divide. Don't quarter. Don't use more than three or four different elements/charges in your shield – the more elements in your shield, the smaller each will have to be to fit, and thus the more minute they will be when added to your letterhead, reproduced in heraldic journals, etc. While a Coat of Arms should reflect your likes and interests, it is not intended as a thorough autobiographical display.

As I said, if an armiger does not have a design already conceived, we are happy to work with them on this.

In order to begin the design process, we encourage an applicant to thoroughly review our FAQs page for what we can and cannot register, as well as for thoughts on design ideas.

Many individuals submit their application but aren't quite sure what they want to include in their arms, and ask us to tell them which elements to include that specifically define elements of their life, their character, their family, etc. The truth is, there is no definitive “dictionary” of heraldic meanings. Over time, certain symbols have been “assigned” traditional meaning in heraldry. In fact, we do include a section on “Heraldic Meanings” on our website, but this comes with a caveat.

Over time, certain symbols have been “assigned” traditional meanings in heraldry, and for those individuals who wish to start from scratch in their designs, we include the list of commonly attributed “meanings.” This is not to say that these are the College's definitions for such symbols, but merely those which are commonly recognized in heraldic usage. Of course, the armiger may completely ignore any or all of these “definitions” and develop arms with symbols that mean something to themselves personally, and not everyone else. It must be remembered; armorial bearings are not like hieroglyphics – they can't be “read.” Years, decades, or centuries from now, no one looking at a coat of arms with a unicorn upon it would attach any “meaning” to that unicorn. It may have meant something specific to the original armiger, or the original armiger may have just liked unicorns. So, it really comes down to what has meaning to the individual armiger, here and now.

Thus, an applicant may completely ignore any or all of these “definitions” and develop arms with symbols that mean something to you personally, and not everyone else.

A further explanation comes from the rec.heraldry FAQ:

Without knowing the circumstances of the original grant, it is difficult to say whether a coat means anything at all, except that someone (grantee or herald) liked the design. Some arms (“canting” arms) contain a charge whose name is related to the surname of the bearer (e.g. de Trumpington: Azure, crusily, two trumpets pileways Or). This can be taken to the extent of becoming a rebus puzzle -- the Borough of Congleton bears Sable, on water in base barry-wavy azure and argent, on a tun between two conger eels argent, a lion statant-guardant Or, which decodes to Conger-Leo-Tun.

In the Middle Ages, bestiaries, popular tales and folklore contributed greatly to the association of specific animals with specific characteristics or virtues, some of which persist to this day (owls are wise, elephants have memory, etc). It is quite possible, for any given coat, that the original bearer chose an animal with such associations in mind.

Often a coat will contain charges alluding to the original grantee's career or interests; for example medieval merchants and guildsmen often included the tools of their trade. These may become less appropriate as the coat is passed down through the generations, or their significance is forgotten. Quite elaborate schemes can be developed: a former Governor General of New Zealand has a coat based on the theme “a cat among the pigeons”, which is apparently how she sees her career.

Some charges were taken from the arms of a bearer's feudal lord or protector as a mark of loyalty. For example, the Maltese cross in the arms of several towns in Switzerland is a reference to the Knights of Malta, who were once sovereign in that area. The frequency with which the bar, a type of fish, appears in coats of arms of the former duchy of Bar in Eastern France can only be explained in this way. Also, imperial eagles which appear in many Italian coats were originally meant as a sign of allegiance to the Imperial party in the conflicts which tore medieval Italy.

Rather than having us guess at what they might wish to include (the “shotgun” approach) we prefer input from the armiger (the “sniper” approach) – only then can we be certain to develop Arms that will actually have meaning to them. So, ideally, they would initially select only 3-4 charges that they feel actually reflect their own life, interests, etc. We also ask that they try to select a primary tincture (Azure, Gules, Vert, Sable, Purple) and a primary metal (Argent or Or). That way we can start building an initial “sketch” from which to build upon.

No doubt many of the terms of heraldry can be quite confusing, though there are some basics which are often misused or transposed (such as crest instead of arms, etc.). We have included a short list of the most commonly used terms at the end of this essay.

One further admonition – **READ** books on heraldry. Merely scanning through the images in such books is certainly pleasing to the eye, but within most well-known titles on heraldry the reader will find reinforced the basic “tenets” common to almost all heraldic design. And this ensures a solid footing from which to begin heraldic design.

Suggested titles include, but are by no means limited to**:

- *An Heraldic Alphabet*, John P. Brooke-Little
- *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*, Arthur Charles Fox-Davies
- *Heraldry: A Pictorial Archive for Artists and Designers*, Arthur Charles Fox-Davies
- *The Art of Heraldry*, Arthur Charles Fox-Davies
- *Basic Heraldry*, Stephen Friar
- *Dictionary of Heraldry*, Stephen Friar
- *Simple Heraldry*, Iain Moncreiffe
- *Heraldry: Sources, Symbols, And Meaning*, Ottfried Neubecker
- *The Complete Book of Heraldry: An International History of Heraldry and Its Contemporary Uses*, Stephen Slater
- *The Art of Heraldry*, Carl-Alexander Von Volborth
- *Heraldry: Customs, Rules, and Styles*, Carl-Alexander Von Volborth
- *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*, Thomas Woodcock
- *Heraldry in America: A Guide With 1000 Illustrations*, Eugene Zieber

A key point – we always ask the applicant to keep in mind that the design we mutually develop will be permanent – it’s not one of those things the armiger can go back and “Monday Morning Quarterback” (to use an American idiom), modifying the Registered Arms at a later date with other elements they may see elsewhere and like better – once it’s done, it’s done. So, this is crucial when finalizing the design in their mind.

Of particular importance in the design process is a section of the FAQs page, quoted herebelow, from *The Art of Heraldry* (Carl-Alexander von Volborth, Blandford Press, Dorset, 1987), which echoes the title of this essay – **KEEP IT SIMPLE**. This is especially relevant for those who wish to design their own Armorial Bearings:

Try to keep the design as simple as possible. Arms are still meant to be means of identification and representation and should be easily recognized and remembered. Crowded designs do not answer to this condition.

And further:

DESIGN OF NEW ARMORIAL BEARINGS

IN COUNTRIES IN *which armorial bearings can be freely assumed (this excludes England, Scotland, Ireland, Spain, and South Africa) the following points should be taken into consideration.*

Make sure that the design is unique and does not infringe upon the rights of others. A coat of arms is personal property, and to have the same or a similar name as an armiger does not mean that one is necessarily related to him and entitled to his arms or a version thereof. If your father’s brother, for instance, assumed a coat of arms, this does not mean that you are entitled to use it, unless he made the necessary provisions. If one cannot prove genealogically to descend from an armiger in the male line, he cannot use his arms.

Try to keep the design as simple as possible. Arms are still meant to be means of identification and representation and should be easily recognized and remembered. Crowded designs do not answer to this condition.

Respect the ethnic background of your family and try to keep the new arms in the style of the country of your origin. If you are, for example, an American citizen, having a German or a French name, don’t use the heraldic style and charges which are characteristic for British or Italian heraldry.

Do not use badges of Orders of Chivalry as charges for your arms. This can be misleading. Should you be a member of such an Order, you can show this outside the actual coat of arms. [NOTE: The College does not display Orders of Chivalry in its Armorial Registrations]

Do not use coronets, crowns or any other object that may have a particular meaning in the heraldry of the historical noblesse. Do not use supporters, they have a particular significance in heraldry and should not be assumed. Avoid everything that could be interpreted as misleading.

In your choice of charges you might search for symbols which express perhaps an occupation or profession that was or is characteristic for members of your family, for a pun on your name (canting arms) or for something relating to the place of origin of your family. There are innumerable possibilities to create a meaningful coat of arms. As for the tinctures you could use your favourite colour combination (preferably limited to one colour and one metal) or the colours of your home town or country. Charges like the rod of Aesculapius for physicians or the Caduceus for merchants for example have been used only too often and are not very original. Try to avoid heraldic platitudes in a new design. A sailor does not have to use a whole ship. Oars, a sail, a boat or a rudder would do the trick, and artisans could use the tools of their trade, preferably in their medieval form. Show the elements on the shield from the most recognizable angle; a hand seen from the side is meaningless, but palm outwards with space between the fingers is instantly identified.

One quite commonly asked question (among many covered in the Frequently Asked Questions portion of the College's website) pertains to **WHY** applicants must adhere to the "tenets and standards" mentioned herein. Admittedly, they seem quite British in nature – granted. But why is this?

Dr. Patrick M. O'Shea, FACH, explained this rather succinctly in his own article entitled "Marshalling of Arms in America: Some Practical Considerations" (*The Armiger's News*, January 2007). While not the core issue of the essay – that of a theoretical (though still problematic) system of marshaling Armorial Bearings in the United States – the essay does explain the conventions followed by our own organization quite nicely.

In his 1895 opus, *Heraldry in America*, Eugene Zieber attempted to reconcile the varying heraldic traditions already long in evidence in the United States. His general recommendation was that English practice should be preferred, and from the perspective of the late 19th century, such a suggestion seemed reasonable. He advanced the following key points:

*A dominant system has to be chosen.
90% of armigerous ancestors of Americans at that time were British.
The original 13 colonies were English possessions.¹*

One may well dispute the percentage given in point 2, and Zieber gives no references or statistics to back up this assertion, but it seems likely that at least a considerable majority of armigerous ancestors of Americans in the 19th century were, in fact British. As for point 3, we might just as easily point out that considerable territories in what is now the United States were originally Spanish, French, or Dutch possessions, but the governmental system (including heraldic rules) of the 13 Colonies that became the United States was extended eventually to these former possessions of other European countries, so the assertion does have some merit. While there are no specific heraldic rules per se, there is an implicit preference for British conventions.

In order to keep our Registration fees low, compared to Grants of Armorial Bearings elsewhere in the world, our final certificates are computer generated using digitally colored artwork. The Arms are emblazoned by one of our heraldic artists, and may either be hand drawn and scanned, or digitally created, as the latter is becoming more and more popular in the field of heraldry as expertise develops.

The design process may be short or long depending on how much work the applicant has done in advance, and thus how much back-and-forth the potential armiger needs to work with our organization so that both parties mutually agree upon a design that is both aesthetically pleasing and heraldically correct. It may also depend on the number of commissions already in our artists' pipeline(s) ahead of their own (the applicant's) emblazonment.

The finished artwork is then added to the Registration certificate, which includes the full text of the Blazon and Registration number, as well as a complete listing of any and all eligible legitimate descendants and their own Registration numbers. It is dated, signed, and embossed-sealed at that point, and shipped to the armiger.

The processes described above have worked for the College throughout its 50+ years in existence, with minor improvements, and will doubtless be further upgraded as both heraldic art and technology mutually progress.

It is usually at this point we receive another quite logical question regarding "protection" for Armorial Bearings Registered in this country. As The Court of The Lord Lyon protects arms Granted in Scotland, The College of Arms protects arms Granted in the United Kingdom, armigers often ask what they can do to obtain the same thing for Registered Arms with the College (or any other US entity). Can Armorial Bearings be trademarked or copyrighted in America?

Well, yes and no. Unfortunately, there is no way to legally protect a coat of arms in this country. A brief article on the subject – http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Coat_of_Arms – is abridged here:

Two very different things are involved in a Coat of Arms.

The Coat of Arms definition is made of words [blazon] – for instance, “Per fess argent and vert, a dragon passant gules.” The Coat of Arms representation is a picture/rendering, which can be drawn/painted by any heraldic artist.

Both the definition and the representation of a Coat of Arms are intellectual creations, and their legal protection may be considered as such.

There are various reasons why the description usually can't be copyrighted: it is often a legal production, most of the time a very old creation, there is little artistic creativity in it, and it is an abstraction, not a definite realisation. The fundamental reason is that definitions are not subject to intellectual property rights, anyway.

To be sure, some Coat of Arms definitions indeed claim copyright, but this is very rare. Furthermore, there is little chance for such a claim to stand in court if the claim is indeed on the definition part (whereas if the claim is made on the representation, it is obviously valid).

This means that anybody can draw a new coat of arms from a definition without copyright constraints: the “derivative work” notion simply doesn't apply in that case.

This also means that a Coat of Arms inspired from another (found on the net), with the same composition, but with a different interpretation, is not a “derivative work”: When a new Coat of Arms picture is made, it is a “derivative” of the (PD) description, not of the website's (copyrighted) image, hence the copyright regime is simply that of a self-made picture.

As to copyright, you could certainly copyright the blazon, but that would not impact someone drawing the arms and displaying them.

You could apply for a trademark, but that would only be for a specific rendering of a coat of arms, and not **ALL** renderings of that coat of arms.

So, the long and short of it is, there is no legal protection in this country.

All that precedes is meant to serve as a guide, and not hard-and-fast instructions for the design of one's own Armorial Bearings. That ultimately resides with the individual, though hopefully an heraldically well-informed individual.

COMMONLY USED HERALDIC TERMS

ACHIEVEMENT: The full armorial honors of an armiger, e.g., shield, crest, wreath, mantling, and helm, with supporters as appropriate.

ARMIGER: One who is entitled to heraldic arms.

ARMORIAL: (1) Of or pertaining to heraldry or heraldic arms. (2) A book or treatise on heraldry.

ARMORY: Now usually comprised within the general term 'heraldry', it refers more specifically to the art or science of the devices borne on the shield and its accompaniments.

ARMS: Strictly the devices painted on the shield, it now tends to be used more loosely.

BADGE: (1) A distinct device which is never borne on a shield or as a crest -- although many of the fifteenth and sixteenth century badges were later also used as crests and supporters. Usually employed as a mark of ownership or worn on the liveries of retainers. (2) A distinctive emblem adopted by many families; not worn on the helmet like a crest but used in various modes where a crest is now employed. It was embroidered on the sleeves of servants and followers, and carved or painted in buildings, etc.

COMPARTMENT: The support, often drawn as a grassy mound, on which the supporters stand.

CREST: The device which is set upon the helm. It is quite wrong to apply this term to the coat of arms or shield. Around the base of the Crest (originally to conceal the join) is placed a wreath of the colours (the two, sometimes more, principal metals and colours of the arms); sometimes instead of a wreath there a Crest Coronet, and more rarely the Crest is set upon a Cap of Estate.

DEXTER: (1) The right side. When applied to a shield it refers to that part which would be towards the right side of the man carrying it, thus the portion on the viewer's left. (2) Heraldry. Located on the wearer's right and the observer's left.

FIELD: (1) The basic surface on the shield on which the charges are placed. When blazoning, the field is always stated first. (2) The background area of a shield or one of the divisions of the background.

HERALD: (1) A person who carries or proclaims important news; messenger. (2) One that gives a sign or indication of something to come; harbinger: The crocus is the herald of spring. (3) Chiefly Brit. An official whose specialty is heraldry. (4) An official formally charged with making royal proclamations and bearing messages of state between sovereigns. (5) An official who formerly made proclamations and conveyed challenges at a tournament. To proclaim; announce: heard the cheers that heralded their arrival.

HERALDIC: Of or pertaining to heralds or heraldry.

HERALDRY: (1) The study or art of tracing genealogies, of determining, designing, and granting coats of arms, and of ruling on questions of rank or protocol. (2) Armorial ensigns or devices. (3) Pageantry.

MANTLING: Conventionalized drapery hanging down the back of the Helm, from below the Crest-wreath, and nowadays usually depicted as carried down on either side of the shield. Sometimes called the Lambrequin.

ORDINARY: (1) The basic geometrical charged used in arms, usually divided into the (honourable) ordinaries and the subordinaries. An ordinary of arms is a collection of arms arranged according to the charges therein. (2) One of the simplest and commonest charges in heraldry, such as the bend and the cross.

QUARTER: (1) The quarter part of a shield. Thus, when more than one different coat of arm is marshaled on a shield, through descent from heraldic heiresses, it was placed 'quarterly'. Later the term was applied to any such 'quartering', however many were marshaled together. (2) Any of four equal divisions of a shield in heraldry.

SINISTER: (1) The side of the shield toward the left of the man carrying it, thus to the right when viewed from in front. (2) On the left of the bearer and hence on the right of the observer.

SUPPORTERS: The human, natural, or fabulous creatures which stand on either side of a shield of arms and support it.