

Coat of Arms

Coats of Arms date to the early Middle Ages. In the early twelfth century, helmets and other armor began making it difficult to tell armed warriors apart. One man in armor looked a lot like another, so the coat of arms was used to identify a knight in battle. In a society where few people could read and write, pictures were very important. The solution was for each knight or soldier to paint something personal on his shield. A coat of arms was more like a label for instant identification than it was like a painting. You wanted to know instantly who was coming toward you, so you could know which side he was on. These designs were important in battle, but they also functioned like team uniforms when knights met in tournaments. Over time, shield emblem designs became enduring symbols of their owners and of their owners' families. They became a way of showing membership in the aristocracy after they lost their significance in warfare.

It became quite fashionable to have a Coat of Arms, so people hired artists to design them. The designs were not just used on shields. They were applied on tunics, saddle blankets, banners and tapestries. They were duplicated in sculpture and architectural features. They were used in signs and advertisements. They were carved into coins, jewelry (e.g. signet rings) and the personalized stamps for sealing letters.

Soon, Coats of Arms were not just for soldiers. From about 1210 A.D., some priests are known to have had them. The first women known to have had their own coat of arms got them around 1220. Around 1230, towns and cities began having coats of arms. Tradesmen and even peasants started using coats of arms around 1250.

Only the oldest son would inherit his family's coat of arms unchanged; his younger brothers would usually add a symbol to show who they were. The symbol a younger son added was often a smaller picture placed in the middle of the shield. When a woman married, especially if she had no brothers, the coat of arms of her family was often added to her husband's arms. Sometimes the arms were quartered, or divided into parts. In this case, the man's family coat of arms was in the upper left quarter (as you look at the coat of arms) and lower right, while the woman's family's arms were in the other two quarters. Shields are generally "read" like a book, starting at the upper left, going across and then down.

The *blazon* was a description of the shield in words, using a special vocabulary. The terms used in heraldry are similar to a kind of old French. French was the language used by the aristocracy during the Middle Ages. The idea is that a shield can be described by one expert in heraldry so that another expert could draw it correctly without ever seeing it. To draw the coat of arms from the description is to *emblazon* it.

A coat of arms can have several parts. The main part is a shield, which can have a crest above it, a motto, and animals supporting the shield. The background of a shield is called the *field*. The basic rule is "metal on color, or color on metal, but not metal on metal or color on color." This means that the field on your shield can be either a metal or a color. The main object or objects should be a color if the field is a metal, or it should be a metal (silver or gold) if the field is a color. If there is another object on top of the main object, it

should be a metal if the background is metal, or a color if the background is a color. It does not have to be the same metal or color. You can have color-metal-color or metal-color-metal. The rule “metal on color or color on metal” is not always used when the charge is *proper*. Proper means in the most common colors found in nature for that object. A *bear proper* would be brown and a *tree proper* would be green with a brown trunk.

However, if the background is divided (such as per pale), those are considered as being next to each other, not on each other, so you can have two or three colors or two metals. This rule about colors and metals provides contrast, making the shields bright and easy to see. If you have a shield with a circle with a horse on it, the base color, the circle and the horse have to follow the metal/color/metal or color/metal/color rule. A gold shield with a green circle and a silver horse would be correct (metal/color/metal); a gold shield with a green circle and a black horse (metal/color/color) would not. However, if you have a horse below a circle, both the horse and circle have to be a color if the shield is a metal, or metal(s) if the shield is a color.

A charge is what is shown on the base color of your shield. Animals were frequently used as a main charge. Animals were shown in certain traditional postures, which were not meant to be realistic pictures of the animals. They were not drawn to look three dimensional, but were shown as if they were flat and with the most characteristic parts of them the most obvious. The pictures were to represent the animal as a symbol. Generally the animals chosen were fierce, and they were often shown in postures of combat. Whatever their main color, fierce animals were often shown with red tongue and claws. Small details on a charge do not have to follow the metal/color rule. A gold griffin can have red claws on a blue field.

Heraldic Colors:

Yellow or Gold - Generosity
White or Silver - Peace & Sincerity
Black - Constancy (& sometimes Grief)
Blue - Loyalty & Truthfulness
Red - Military Fortitude & Magnanimity
Green - Hope, Joy & sometimes Loyalty
Purple - Royal Majesty, Sovereignty & Justice

Heraldic Animals:

Bear - Protectiveness
Bee - Industriousness
Camel - Perseverance
Dog - Loyalty
Double Eagle & Eagle - Leadership & Decisiveness
Dragon - Defender of Treasure
Falcon or Hawk - Eagerness
Fox - Cleverness
Griffin (part eagle, part lion) - Bravery
Horse - Readiness to Serve
Lion - Courage
Pelican - Generosity & Devotion
Raven – Constancy

Heraldic Animals (cont.):

Snake - Ambition
Stag, Elk or Deer - Peace & Harmony
Tiger - Fierceness & Valor
Unicorn - Extreme courage
Wolf - Constant Vigilance

The dragon and griffin are mythological animals which often combine characteristics believed to be found in more than one animal. The griffin was part eagle, part lion. Since the animals were symbols of qualities, such combination animals were meant to indicate a combination of those qualities.

Heraldic Symbols:

Axe - Dutiful
Bridge - (signifies a governor or magistrate)
Crescent - Enlightenment
Crosses - Christian sentiments
Crown - Authority
Fire - Zeal
Flaming Heart - Passion
Fleur-de-lys (stylized Iris flower) - Purity (associated with France)
Hand - Faith, Sincerity & Justice
Heart - Sincerity
Horns & Antlers - Fortitude
Lightning - Decisiveness
Moon - Serenity
Oyster Shell - Traveler
Ring - Fidelity
Scepter - Justice
Star - Nobility
Sun - Glory
Sword - Warlike
Tower or Castle - Fortitude & Protectiveness

Common Heraldic Terminology:

Bend - a diagonal stipe
Chevron - an upside-down "V"
Chief - broad stripe across top of shield
Couchant - lying down
Ermine - a white fur pattern (with black tail tips)
Fess - broad horizontal stripe through center
Pale - broad vertical stripe through center
Passant - an animal shown walking
Rampant - an animal standing on hind legs
Rampant guardant - an animal standing on hind legs, face turned toward viewer
Sejant - sitting

Basic Design Ideas:

Family Name - A common design on a shield was a pun on the family (last) name. The coat of arms for "Wheatley" has sheaves of wheat on the shield. Some other shields showed allegiance to one side in a dispute by putting its symbol on their shields. The cross on a coat of arms often meant that the original bearer had been to the Crusades. A cross used on a shield was always taken very seriously. There are many forms of the cross.

Static - A blazon represented a family, on an estate. When the head of the family died, his eldest son inherited the family arms, as well as the estate. The coat of arms represented something permanent, stable and unchanging. Medieval people believed that everything, and every person, had a certain place in the universe, and this was not supposed to change. Movement and the suggestion of change were not generally seen on medieval shields.

Symbolic - Pictures on shields were symbolic, that is, they were something that represented a quality to the viewer beyond what he saw. For instance, a lion or an eagle meant "courage". The picture was drawn so that everyone would know what it was, but it was not important that it look like a real eagle.

Stylized - Animals and other things on shields were meant to be instantly recognizable, but they were stylized. They were drawn according to rules, not realistically. Usually they were drawn a position that showed their most important characteristics clearly (a lion's mane, a unicorn's horn, etc.) Animals were drawn from directly in front, or in profile, not from a three-quarters view, or partly turned. This also helped to ensure that the same blazon, or description of a shield, could be drawn by different artists and still look very much the same.

Flat - images on a shield were shown in pure, flat colors, without any shading. They were not drawn in perspective. Items were not shown in the proper size to each other, either. Things might be drawn larger because they were more important, but not because they were in fact larger. A horse might be as large as a castle, not because it was closer to the viewer than the castle, but because it was equally important, or because it made a balanced design.

Bold - shields were meant to be seen across a battlefield. Also, they were a proclamation of who you were. Lords in the Middle Ages were not shy about who they were or their accomplishments.

Mottos:

Coats of Arms also often included a motto which expressed the ideals of the family, including loftily of virtue, courage, loyalty, strength, and faith. They could be in the vernacular language, but French and Latin were often used for a more aristocratic feel. The following are some examples from the Middle Ages and a few from modern times.

British monarchy: *Dieu et mon droit* (God and my right)

British Order of the Garter: *Honi soit qui mal y pense* (Shamed be he who thinks ill of it)

Culpeper Family: *J'espere* (I hope)

Jesu Christe fili Dei misere mei (Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me)

Wilkinson Family: *Tenez le droit* (Hold the right)

Nec rege, nec populo, sed utroque (Not for king, nor for people, but for both)

Memor et fidelis

Pope John Paul II: *Totus tuus*

West Point: *Duty, Honor, Country*

State of Alabama: *Audemus jura nostra defender* (We dare maintain our rights, we dare defend our rights)