
The Design of American Heraldry: An Interview with Charles V. Mugno

Written by Steven Heller

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Charles V. Mugno, director, Heraldic Services and Support Division at the Institute of Heraldry, is largely responsible for conceiving and fabricating the emblems that say “America.” For a nation that was born of rebellion against the entrenched traditions of Europe, the idea of heraldry—as representing an aristocracy—is a bit of a paradox. And starting with Betsy Ross’ decidedly modern American flag, this nation, like any other, demanded a language of emblems and seals that galvanized the populace and symbolized its values and virtues. In this interview, Mr. Mugno discusses the forms and functions of this special, yet ubiquitous, form of design.

Heller: Military insignia are born of heraldic traditions, but so many of them are decidedly modern. What inspiration (or background) material do you rely on to design a military symbol?

Mugno: The history, lineage, location, mission and branch affiliation are the primary focus in the design of insignia. We are provided specific information by the customer (e.g., a military unit or government agency) such as a motto if they chose to use one, specific colors associated with the unit/agency, a mascot or symbol they are using, or even a design created by the customer through a contest to promote esprit de corps among its members. For Navy and Coast Guard ships, we use information provided by the commander about the type of vessel and the origin of the ship’s name. We thoroughly research all aspects of potential design elements using our extensive library located on premises, internet resources and information provided by the customer. When the insignia is for a newly organized unit and there is no history to consider you will see “art imitating life,” and more contemporary abstract patterns may be used to establish an identity.

Heller: Is there a uniquely American style for designing crests and seals for government and military?

Mugno: Heraldry is extremely traditional in its approach. American heralds, for the most part, follow Western European practices. This is evident in designs for coats of arms and crests for organizational colors (flags). There are many symbols used, however, that are uniquely American and connect our history to Native Americans, such as the use of the bald eagle, American corn, wheat, cactus and other elements symbolic of our heritage. The use of 13 stars to represent the 13 original colonies or 50 stars to represent the 50 states is also common.

Heller: Are there guidelines that you must follow? And are these set in stone or carried out in an informal manner?

Mugno: The first rule of heraldry is that color on color or metal on metal is not permitted. In addition, there are specific requirements, limitations and restrictions concerning overall size, number of colors and design elements allowed for a particular seal, flag, badge, patch or distinguishing insignia. Distinctive unit insignia (an enameled metal pin worn by soldiers), coats of arms (on a flag) and shoulder sleeve insignia (patch) for an organization can share a color scheme and some design elements, but cannot be identical. The patch is the simplest of the three, using just three or four colors and usually not more than three symbols to depict the organization. Simple designs are the most notable and least likely to require change or revision in the future. For example, a few of the most recognized cloth insignia for Army units include: the First Infantry Division, a red numeral one embroidered on an olive drab irregular shield shape; the First U.S. Army, a black block letter “A” on a rectangle divided white and red by the cross bar of the block letter; and the flag of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a white castle on a red background. These designs are simple, timeless and readily identify the organization.

Heller: When a new symbol is conceived—say for something like Homeland Security—what is the design brief, and how do you go about solving the problem?

Mugno: When tasked with a new project, we gather as much information as possible about the mission or purpose of the organization, as well as specific design elements that are desired. A blank canvas is rare because even when an organization is open to anything; it is usually followed by “except for...” and they are suddenly able to articulate things they do not want represented.

As previously mentioned, thorough research plays a key role in developing the best design. Government agencies and military commands often present the added difficulty of “design by committee” which involves multiple levels of individuals who believe their views and opinions need to be considered. The heraldic artist must take the very best visual information available and create a strong design that can stand the test of time for the organization, not the individuals who have been tasked with getting a symbol or design for the organization.

Heller: Some symbols seem to never change. I understand that the president’s seal has only changed once since Harry Truman was president. Is there ever a time when such key symbols are considered for alteration?

Mugno: Symbols like the presidential seal are so timeless that every image, every color and every position has meaning, and the authenticity is lost with changes. Change for the sake of change is not a mindset of the heraldic artist or anyone who appreciates the significance of having a seal, coat of arms or insignia. As a rule, the strength of an emblem correlates to its years of use; standing the test of time gives authenticity.

Heller: Are symbols reviewed on a regular basis? I know that these become so charged that change is difficult, but have there been instances where history or politics necessitate change?

Mugno: No, if it is determined that an insignia or design is incorrect or some element of it is now considered offensive, then it will be changed. Recently, several ROTC and Junior ROTC units requested changes to their patches because their schools made a decision to change their Native American mascots to other identifiers. Sometimes the motto for a unit might need to be changed because it is no longer accurate. For example, with the growing number of women serving side by side with men, the motto “Fighting Men” would require change as well as any insignia where it appeared. An unchanged insignia lends to its legitimacy, just as the attributes it portrays are regarded as timeless; no fashion trends, political winds, or personal taste should be allowed to override established work.

Heller: How much iteration must a designer go through before nailing the perfect image? And what is the approval policy like?

Mugno: It’s not as much about “nailing the perfect image” as symbolizing the organization in a way that tells the story, states the mission and further defines the unit or organization. The back-and-forth exchange of ideas between the artist and the representative usually takes place during the design phase so that when a suggested design is delivered, it is accepted. There are often comments or requests for modification of the original suggested design, and as long they do not duplicate existing insignia or fall into the category of “politically incorrect,” we do our best to incorporate them into the design.

Heller: Are certain colors preferred over others? Are there colors or images that are simply forbidden?

Mugno: Heraldry is based on a small basic set of tinctures: azure (dark blue), gules (red), celeste (light blue), vert (green), sable (black), sanguine (brown/maroon) and tenne (orange). The two metals, gold and silver, are identified as or and argent respectively, and would be depicted in cloth as yellow and white.

Due to historical events, there are symbols that would not be used, such as the red star which is associated with the former Soviet Union, the “stars and bars” of the confederacy, or the swastika which is identified with Hitler and the Nazis of World War II. Religious symbols are not used, except in items for the chaplains or religious offices of the military. Any image that could be considered in poor taste, anything suggestive, and specific weapons and machinery are not used. Weapons and machinery are depicted in a general manner—a sword, a helicopter blade, a bi-plane—are all non-specific and stand the test of time to depict weapons and aircraft.

Heller: What is the training like for the members of your design team? What rigors must they have before becoming a designer of such charged images?

Mugno: Heraldry can be a solitary pursuit. Those who forge ahead with a disciplined, self-taught program are the most successful in producing heraldically correct and engaging designs. With that said, the artistic staff of the Institute has a varied educational background from art school, design school, interior design, bachelor of arts, to masters of fine arts. In the area of heraldry, it is on the job training and the self discipline to read and work independently studying existing coats of arms, military history and symbolism. The Institute is a one of a kind organization within the government and the work is so unique and interesting that we have a very low turnover, which is fortunate. Newly hired illustrators start off working on revisions to existing drawings because of unit re-designations or the need for additional specific color information. They move on to more challenging work, including designs for the ROTC programs, Air Force badges, group and squadron patches, and ultimately designing medals, decorations, ribbons, badges, seals, plaques, distinctive unit insignia, shoulder-sleeve insignia, and coats of arms.

Heller: You also design medals and awards. What determines the symbolic make up of such things? What is the different design component for campaign medals versus bravery citations?

Mugno: The type of award is the key to the design. A campaign medal is limited to a standard shape and size. There are separate designs for the obverse, reverse and ribbon pattern that combine to make up the complete decoration. These elements come together to define the award. The obverse is designed with reference to the theater of operation, usually incorporating a symbol common to the region, while the reverse often contains a appropriate symbol (such as a wreath, torch or laurel) or nationally recognized emblem. Ribbon colors may represent the area of operation, such as the national colors of the region or those associated with allied forces. A medal for valor, heroism or meritorious service is limited only by the designer's imagination. These awards follow a similar process as a campaign medal; however, they are rarely circular in shape. The reverse usually has an area to engrave the name of the recipient as well a symbol and/or inscription relative to the type of award.

Heller: Are there any signs, symbols, medals or seals that are in the deep freeze waiting to be unveiled?

Mugno: There are always new and interesting projects. Most recently, we were contacted by the Army Historical Foundation to assist with the design of a one dollar U.S. coin to commemorate the 235th anniversary of the U.S. Army. It is our policy, however, not to discuss specific issues or design recommendations until formally approved by the client.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne)