



The Washington Flag Congress 2011

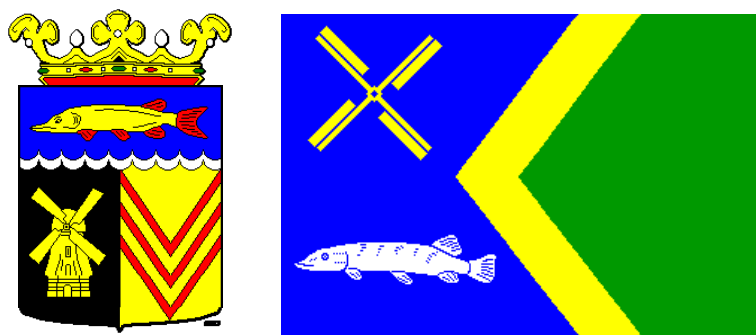
Translating Coats-of-Arms and Emblems into Flags

Marcel van Westerhoven

Abstract

Flag designs will come into their own if the special qualities of flags are taken into account. The wind plays an important role in that. So, horizontal patterns will wave better than vertical ones if the flag flies from a vertical mast. Objects moved to the hoist will have better visibility. Using the practice of *pars-pro-toto* makes flags simpler and more readily recognizable from a distance. And complicated symbols or human figures on coats-of-arms can be translated into clear symbolism. This is how Dutch local flags were and still are designed and can be seen in many examples. This way of designing local flags can now also be seen in abundance in Flanders, the Czech Republic, some parts of Spain, and Puerto Rico.

Designing local flags with these principles will lead to distinctive, simple, and recognizable flags that will perform well in outside conditions. The basis is there already: you can use the coats-of-arms or emblems already in existence. The design quality of these flags can be compared to national and subnational flags and will stand out. They will have status by being not sub-par in design compared to those flags of “higher order”. Will these principles reach more countries in the future? Who will follow?



Municipal coat-of-arms and flag of Schermer, the Netherlands

Translating Coats-of-Arms and Emblems into Flags

Introduction

All over the world many cities, towns, municipalities, and sometimes even villages fly their own flag. Most of the time, they are officially adopted by the local authorities. In some countries the adoption of local flags must conform to national rules, maintained by the ministry of internal affairs or delegated to a special heraldic authority. In many countries subnational entities are free to adopt their own flag. Sometimes they come into existence by spontaneous action by their citizens. What these municipal flags all have in common is that they express civic pride: being a specific entity with its own authority, history, traditions, culture, values, commerce, and tourist attractions, proclaimed by colourful pieces of cloth with specific symbols, waving in the wind from poles at prominent places around town. That would be the ideal situation. In not a few instances the officially adopted flag can never be observed outside and turns out to only exist on paper or to be only used inside the local office buildings. But many local authorities do use them, though often only in one place: the town hall. Local flags really come alive if also citizens, local associations (like sport clubs), tourist sites, and companies are allowed to use them and are stimulated to do so, for instance by facilitating the acquisition of the flag. Acceptance and therefore use of the local flag by the citizens will be aided if the flag has been adopted democratically—by decree of the local council, is significant in regard to history, traditions, and symbols already in existence, and is pleasing to the eye. From this comes that the flag should be easily identifiable, recognizable, simple and unique, and also that the existing coat-of-arms, emblems or seals should be taken into account.

In most cases, the coat-of-arms has been the starting point for the design of the local flag. But the way in which the coat-of-arms is used for the flag can differ greatly from country to country and even inside a country. Therefore this paper will first give an overview of the different types of flag which have the coat-of-arms as a basis. Local flags in countries where there is no strong heraldic tradition and where they are not derived from their emblems or seals, like those of the United States of America, are only dealt with in passing.

From the overview it will become clear which type of flag will be effective by simply considering the fact that a flag is not a rigid rectangular image, but a piece of cloth that depends on the wind to show itself. Effectiveness is also attained by taking public attractiveness into account in designing simple, unique, easily recognizable, and meaningful flags, derived from coats-of-arms. I will use the Dutch tradition of deriving flags from coats-of-arms to show the principles and the tools that can be used to achieve this.

Local flag types

Taking a look at the thousands of local flags all over the world, three main ways of using the coat-of-arms as a basis for the flag can be discerned:

- the coat-of-arms (or emblem) has been put on a flag that can contain colours from the coat-of-arms;
- the shield of the coat-of arms has been expanded into an armorial banner;
- the flag has been derived from the coat-of-arms.

Coat-of-arms or emblem on the flag

In very many occasions the complete coat-of-arms has been placed on the flag, a very direct way of using existing symbolism. The flag itself often is a mono-colour or a bi- or tri-colour with colours derived from the coat of arms, which can be and often is a complicated affair, not easily recognizable from a distance or even from nearby.

Coats-of-arms in the centre of monocoloured flags can be seen in Croatia and Hungary, where they are abundant. In other parts of Europe, they can be seen in many instances, such as in France. The monocoloured field of this type of flag only has the function of a carrier for heraldry. Figure 1 shows the flag of the city of Sibenik in Croatia as an example.



Figure 1 City flag of Sibenik, Croatia

This type of flag design resembles that of the many city flags in the USA in which the city seal has been put on a monocoloured flag, often blue. Figure 2 shows the flag of the city of Hartford, Connecticut, as a typical example.



Figure 2 City flag of Hartford, Connecticut, USA

A step further is taking all or some colours from the arms and using them in a pattern of two, three, or more horizontal stripes. Because the number of possible sequences of colours in bi- and tricolours is limited, this practice leads to a lot of *doppelgänger*s. To make them distinctive, local authorities resort to putting the coat-of-arms on the flag. One can see these flags in abundance in Germany and Austria and to a far lesser extent also in other parts of Central Europe, for instance in Poland, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Figure 3 shows an archetypal German municipal flag of three stripes in colours taken from the coat-of-arms, with the coat-of-arms itself in the upper part of a vertically suspended long banner. Although partly derived from it, putting the coat-of-arms on the flag in my opinion robs the flag of having its own place among the municipal symbols.



Figure 3 Municipal flag of Rohrdorf, Germany

A very specific kind of flag consisting of one or two colours and the coat-of-arms in the middle is the ceremonial gonfalone, used by every city and municipality in Italy. Figure 4 shows the gonfalone of the city of San Gimignano in Tuscany. These special flags of fine workmanship with intricate embroidery are mostly kept inside in the council room and only taken outside on special occasions, like official parades. The bigger Italian cities also have a normal flag for outside use, often a monocolour with the coat-of-arms in the centre.



Figure 4 Gonfalone of the city of San Gimignano, Italy

Coats-of-arms can also be put on more intricate patterns. In Portugal, many municipal flags have a gyronny pattern in the two main colours from the coat-of-arms and the complete arms itself placed in the centre, like the city flag of Lisbon (figure 5). Quarterly patterns are also quite popular in Portugal. In France, many cities fly a vertical bicolour with the complete arms in the centre, like the city of Orléans (figure 6).



Figure 5 City flag of Lisbon, Portugal



Figure 6 City flag of Orléans, France

If the coat-of-arms is complicated, this type of flag will not be easily recognizable from a distance. These flags are typically used by the local authorities and often not by citizens. It seems that local authorities intend it to be this way and view the flag with the heraldry on it as a protected trademark, only to be used by them. It is as if the flag is sealed with the coat-of-arms, which radiates an aura of authority. To many people, accustomed to this flag type, this is what a traditional municipal flag should look like.

In the USA, a lot of municipal flags have a similar composition. Instead of a coat-of-arms, a seal has been put on the flag. The designs of the flag fields are more intricate and inventive. The chosen colours have often nothing in common with the seals. An example is the flag of the city of Long Beach, California, USA (figure 7), a very rare case in which the seal does have a link with the flag colours and pattern.



Figure 7 City flag of Long Beach, California, USA

Armorial flags

A simpler and better solution to derive a flag from the local heraldry, stemming from a medieval tradition once seen all over Europe, is morphing the shield of the coat-of-arms into a square flag, a so-called banner-of-arms. If the coat-of-arms is reasonably simple, you can get a very good and distinctive design. This kind of flag can be seen all over Switzerland, where every municipality has its own armorial banner. Because of their shape, they do not need a lot of wind to show themselves. Figure 8 shows the flag of Risch, in Zug canton, Switzerland. Traditionally, local flags in Sweden and Finland are also square banners-of-arms, such as the flag of the city of Turku, Finland (figure 9).



Figure 8 Municipal flag of Risch, Switzerland



Figure 9 City flag of Turku, Finland

Armorial flags can also be in the common, rectangular shape. Most municipalities in Norway use this type, which could be called “flags-of-arms”. The flag-of-arms of the municipality of Sveio, Norway, can be seen in figure 10. The flag-of-arms is quite popular throughout Europe and has even found its way to Ukraine and Russia. Figure 11 shows the flag-of-arms of the city of Kamianets Podilskyi in Ukraine.



Figure 10 Municipal flag of Sveio, Norway



Figure 11 City flag of Kamianets Podilskyi, Ukraine

Though strictly speaking armorial flags are another way of displaying local heraldry, they can be very distinctive, effective and pleasing to the eye.

In this regard, I cannot go on without mentioning the Japanese local flags. They often are striking and resemble the European flags-of-arms with a single charge on a monocoloured field. Instead of the coat-of-arms they contain the typical Japanese *mon*, a stylized traditional symbol, for example of a bird, a flower or a *katakana* or *hiragana* character. In the city flag of Himeji, Japan (figure 12), a white heron taking flight can be discerned.



Figure 12 City flag of Himeji, Japan

Flags derived from coats-of-arms

Flag designs come into their own if their special qualities are taken into account. They are not meant to be rigid rectangles, but are subject to the wind. Many coats-of-arms are quite complicated, so converting them into an armorial flag will not yield an effective flag. That is why in some countries another way of designing flags from coat-of-arms has come to the fore: derivation. This means that only the main charges and colours are taken from the local heraldry and are rearranged so that an effective flag will be accomplished. Complicated figures are not depicted in full, but symbolized.

Only in a few countries has this method of translating the contents of a coat-of-arms into a flag been embraced, starting in the Netherlands. In Belgium, many flags are of this type, especially in Flanders. In Figure 13, in the flag of the municipality of Nieuwerkerken the striped pattern comes from the dexter half of the arms and the bishop from the sinister half has been symbolized by only depicting the head of his crosier in a triangle.

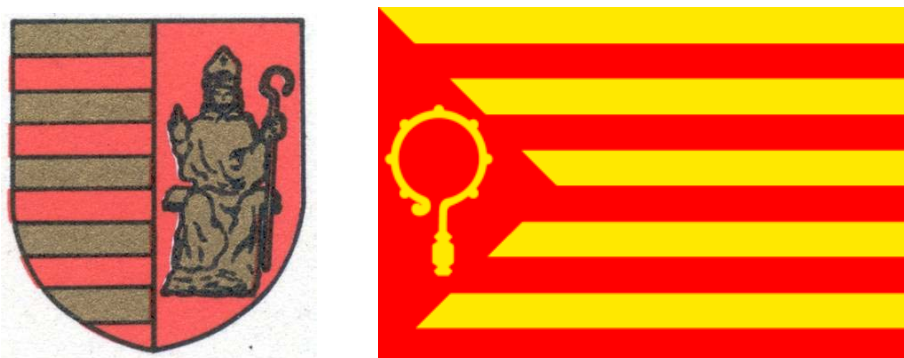


Figure 13 Coat-of-arms and flag of the municipality of Nieuwerkerken, Belgium

Also in certain regions of Spain, for instance in Catalunya, Aragón, and León, nearly all municipal flags are of this type. In figure 14 we can see that the municipal flag of Begur is a simplification of the contents of the arms. The city gate has been put in the most important place of the flag, the top hoist, where it will also be visible when the wind is weak.



Figure 14 Coat-of-arms and flag of the municipality of Begur, Catalunya, Spain

Since the 1990s the Czech Republic has become the hotspot of municipal flag design, surpassing the Netherlands. Year after year hundreds of new municipal flags are adopted, often with striking and innovative designs, using the method of derivation. As an example, figure 15 shows the flag of the municipality of Mořice. Two main design tricks have been used here: reduction of the charges to only the sword and turning the vertical orientation to horizontal for optimal performance in the wind.

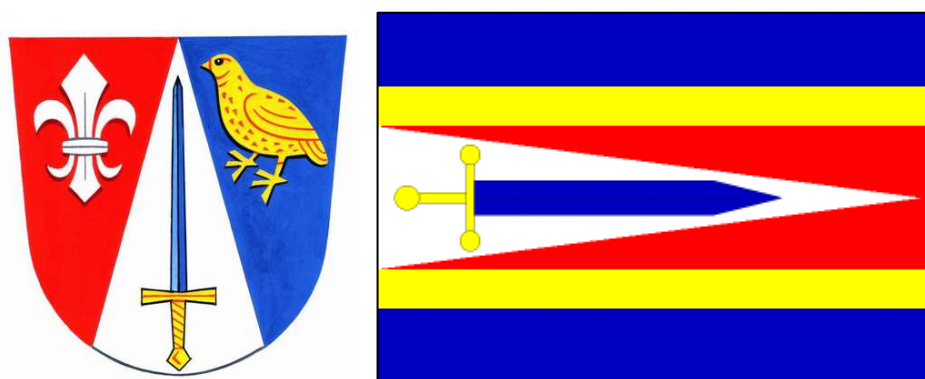


Figure 15 Coat-of-arms and flag of the municipality of Mořice, Czech Republic

Outside of Europe, only in a few countries' municipalities apply derivation principles to their flag designs. In Latin America, there are some good flag designs to be found, but in many cases the coat-of-arms has been put on the flag. However, in Puerto Rico municipal flags do have effective designs. Figure 16 demonstrates this. The two angels from the arms of Yabucoa have been rendered in the flag in a very abstract but striking way.

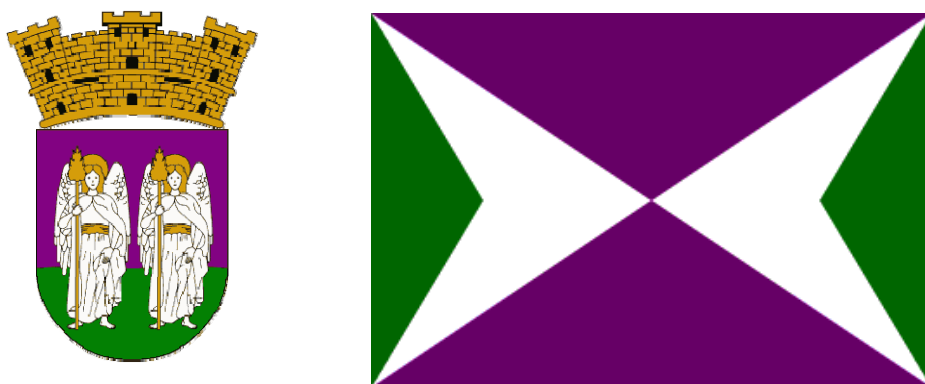


Figure 16 Coat-of-arms and flag of the municipality of Yabucoa, Puerto Rico

There are more countries where local flags are derived from the coats-of-arms, for instance in Poland, Estonia, Ukraine, and Russia, but not as consistently as in the countries mentioned above. To finish this item, figure 17 shows how the city of Québec in Canada designed a simple and distinctive flag from its slightly complicated coat-of-arms, a rare example of a city in North America applying derivation principles.

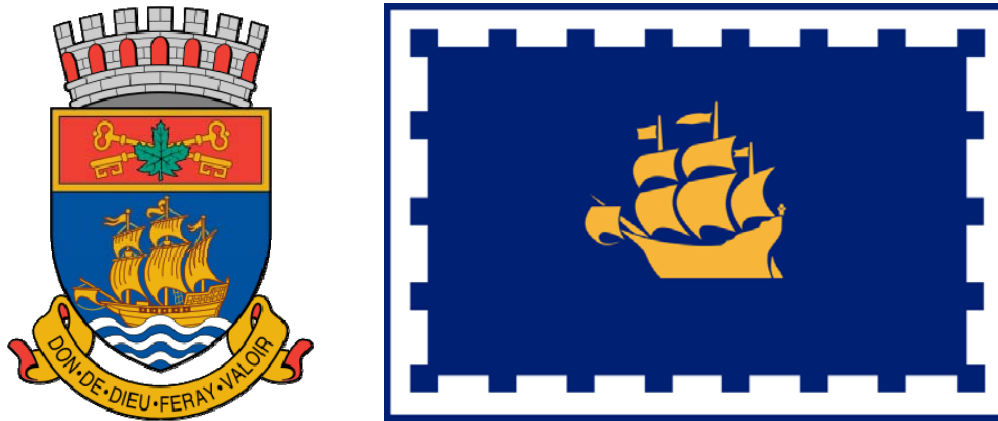


Figure 17 Coat-of-arms and flag of the city of Québec, Canada

Effective flag design

We vexillologists in the Netherlands like to think that we initiated flag-from-arms derivation. The Dutch were certainly the first to do so consistently and consciously from the 1960s onwards, followed by the Belgians. Thanks to individual designers like Klaes Sierksma, Gerlof Auke Bontekoe, and Hans van Heijningen, many Dutch municipalities have flags with striking designs. Also the *Hoge Raad van Adel* (High Council of Nobility), which has an advisory task regarding municipal flags, played and is still playing an important role in this. The Czech municipal flag designers have been inspired by Dutch flag design and have now surpassed the Netherlands in quantity and inventiveness. It seems that the Spanish developed their design style on their own, as did the Puerto Ricans.

In order to derive effective flags for outside use from coats-of-arms, designers apply the following principles:

- Turning the image by 90° to let the flag perform optimally in the wind
- Placing charges at the hoist side, so that they are also visible during a weak wind
- Simplification to keep them recognizable from a distance by
 - reducing the number of charges and colours from the coats-of-arms
 - using *pars-pro-toto* principles: use only a part of a symbol to get a larger and clearer picture
 - symbolizing human figures by representing them by means of their specific attributes
- Augmenting the design to make it more distinctive

In the next paragraphs, these principles will be illustrated by showing examples from the Dutch practice.

90° turn

If the coat-of-arms has a vertical arrangement, to get a flag that will perform well in the wind, flying from a vertical pole, the heraldic image should be turned by 90°. The Dutch capital, Amsterdam, applies this principle in its flag, as can be seen in figure 18.

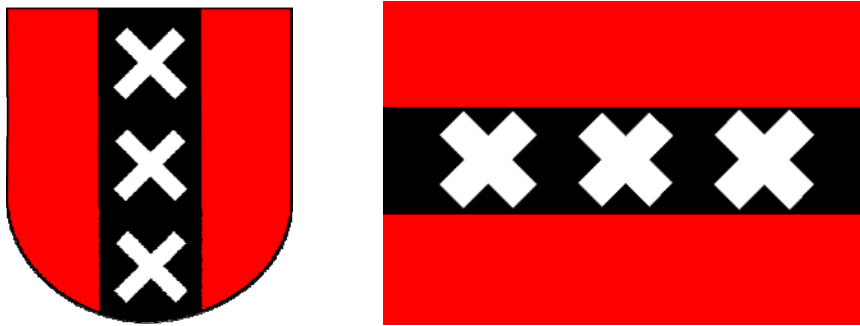


Figure 18 Amsterdam municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Hoist placement

If there is a strong wind, no matter on which part of the flag the symbol has been put, it will be visible. But the symbols on flags should also be visible in a light breeze, which often will be the reigning weather condition. Placing one or more symbols at the hoist side will make it easier to identify the flag. In its flag, Leiden has put its crossed keys on the hoist side (see figure 19), so that even in a weak wind it will not be mistaken for the flag of Austria. Bear in mind that in the Netherlands flags are often flown from a short pole put in a bracket that makes a 45° angle with the wall of the building from which it is suspended. Even in a very light wind, a charge at the hoist side of a flag will be perfectly visible in that case, while hanging from a vertical pole it will disappear inside the folds.

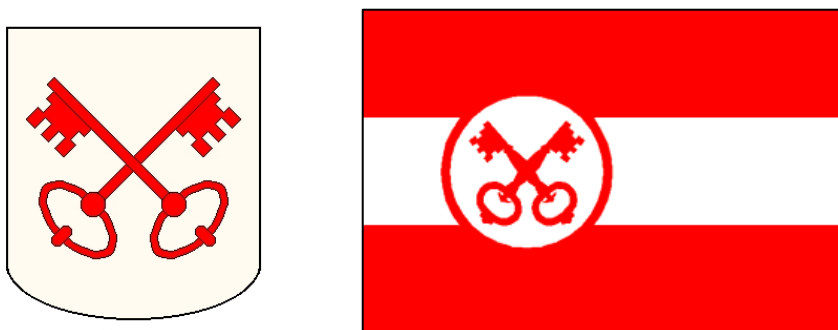


Figure 19 Leiden municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Pars-pro-toto and reduction

If the coat-of-arms contains a more complex charge, it can be represented in the flag by taking a characteristic part of it, like the sails taken from the windmill in the case of the municipality of Schermer (see figure 20). Using *pars-pro-toto* practices—taking a part to represent the whole—makes flags simpler and more readily recognizable from a distance.

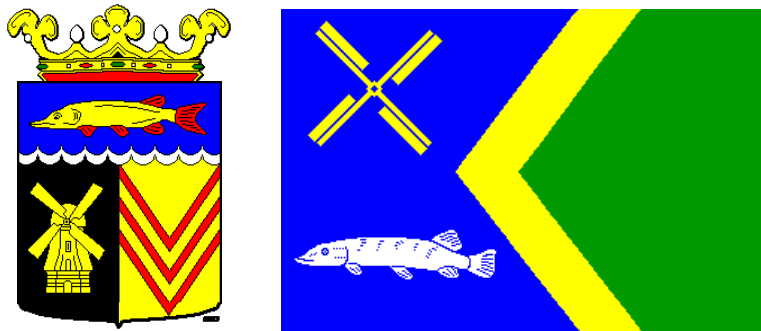


Figure 20 Schermer municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Coats-of-arms can be intricate affairs, like the one of the municipality of Neerijnen (figure 21). Here, to achieve an effective flag, the reduction practice has been applied. The colour black has been ignored, the pales of vair have been converted to narrow blue stripes (the 90° turn principle again) and only one of the three lion heads and one of the two salmon has been placed at the hoist side.

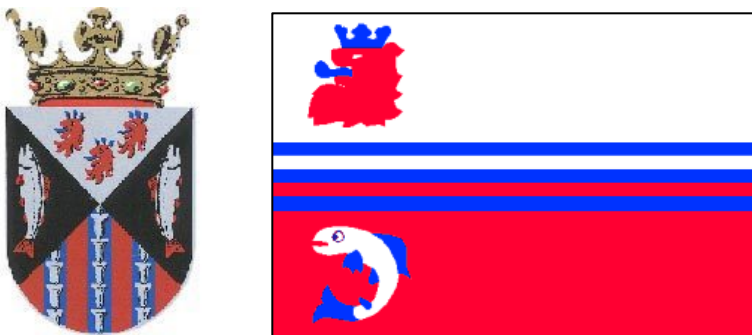


Figure 21 Neerijnen municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Figure 22 shows the symbols of Rhenen, a town with medieval city rights. The coat-of-arms of these old towns in many occasions have a castle, gate, or tower in their arms. In the flag of Rhenen, the rather complicated figure of the city gate has been reduced to a crenellated division in the flag.

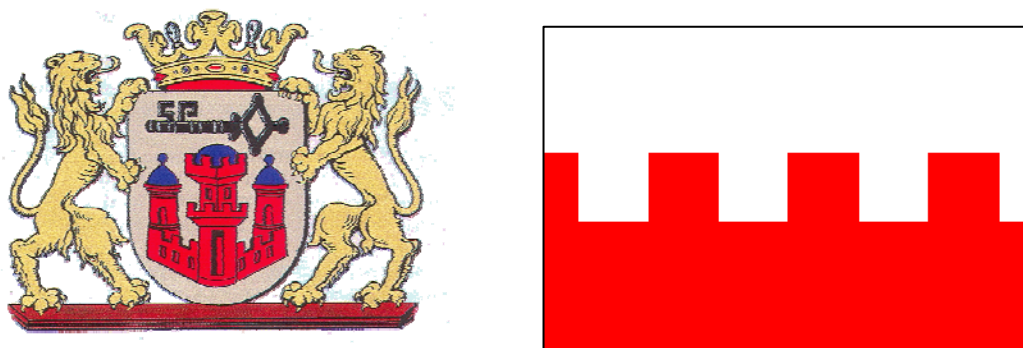


Figure 22 Rhenen municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Symbolizing human figures

Not a few municipal coat-of-arms in the Netherlands contain a human figure in their shield, in most occasions a patron saint. Using human figures in heraldry is controversial, let alone in vexillology. To tackle this problem, Dutch flag designers have come up with a solution borrowed from Christian iconography: representation of the saint by his or her specific attribute. An attribute is an iconic motif associated with the life of a saint in order to identify him or her. Saints are almost always depicted carrying their attribute in their hand, also to tell one from the other. If the attribute is an animal, most of the time it has been placed at their feet.

There are many cases in Dutch municipal flags of representing the saint from the arms by an attribute. A few examples will suffice to show this practice.

In the very complicated coat-of-arms of the former municipality of Huijbergen (figure 23), Saint Mary has a prominent position. One of her titles is Star of the Sea, so a star has been put in the flag to represent her. Her other main attribute is a fleur-de-lis as *pars-pro-toto* of her sceptre. Both symbols can be seen in many municipal flags around the Netherlands.

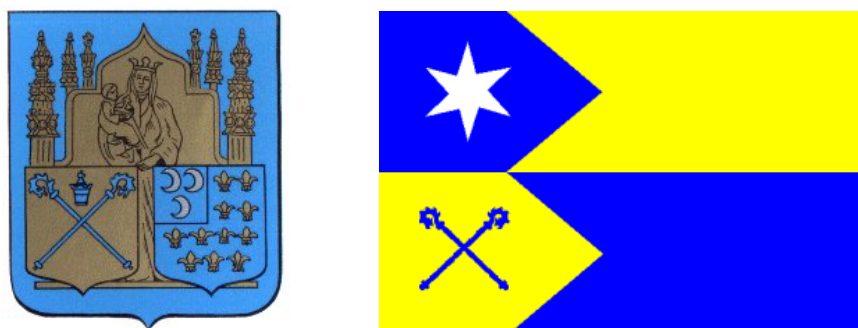


Figure 23 Huijbergen municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Saint Peter can be identified by one or two keys in his hand, symbol of his office as heaven's gatekeeper. A rare instance where the supporter of the coat-of-arms has been represented on the

flag is that of Boxtel municipality (figure 24). The crossed keys in the flag stand for Saint Peter supporting the municipal shield.

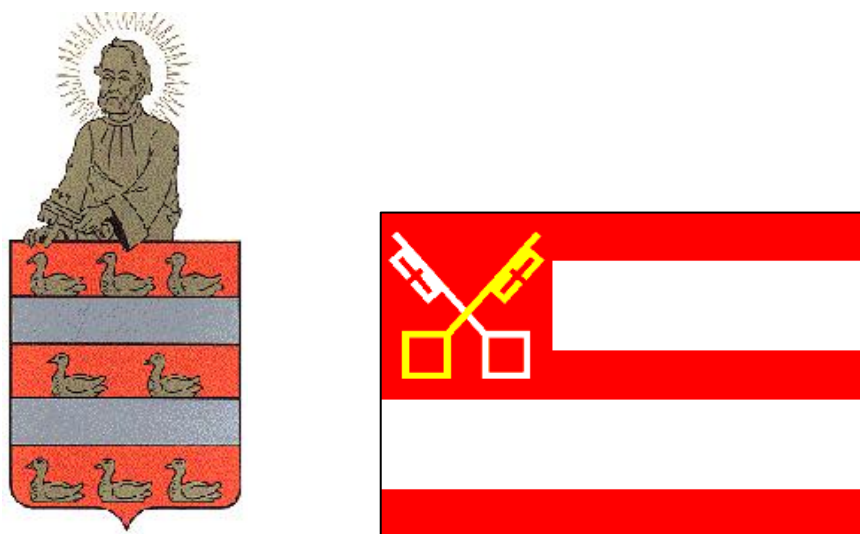


Figure 24 Boxtel municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Saint Martin is a popular patron saint in the Netherlands. In coats-of-arms, like that of the municipality of Stein (figure 25), he is depicted as a knight astride a horse, cutting off half of his mantle to give it to an almost naked beggar. In Dutch municipal flags, the convention is to represent Saint Martin in flags by a diagonal division, stemming from the ancient coat-of-arms of the city of Utrecht. The diagonal division in the Utrecht arms is said to stand for the cutting of the mantle.

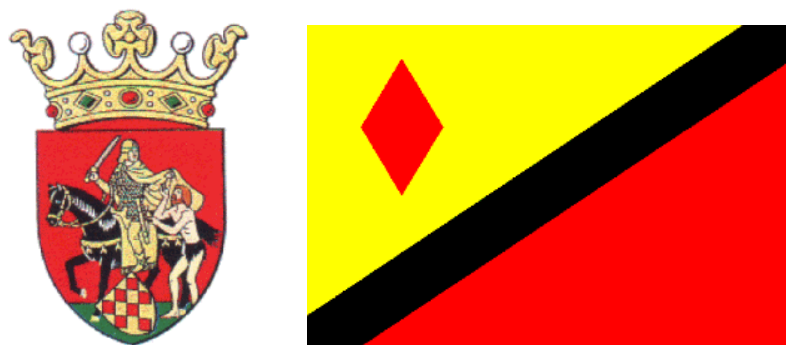


Figure 25 Stein municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Saint Servatius, the first bishop of Maastricht and in the Netherlands in general, has a key as his attribute. To avoid confusing the key with that of Saint Peter, his other striking attribute has been added to the flag of the former municipality of Erp (figure 26): a dragon. The dragon at the saint's feet stands for his victory over the Arian heresy, which was seen as evil.



Figure 26 Erp municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

The coat-of-arms of the municipality of Ede, which dates from the time of the French Revolution, is not charged with a saint, but with the allegory of Liberty: a female figure holding a pole with the liberty hat on it in her right hand and resting her left arm on a bible (figure 27). For the flag, to represent Liberty the hat and the book have been stylized.

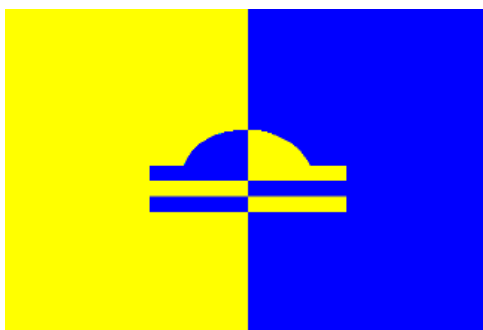


Figure 27 Ede municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Augmentation

If the coat-of-arms is simple, designers can enhance the symbolism in the flag without complicating it. Many toponyms in the Netherlands contain the word *berg*, meaning mountain, or rather an elevation in the landscape. In Dutch flags, the *berg* element is often depicted by means of a hoist triangle, like in the flag of the former municipality of Bergharen (figure 28).

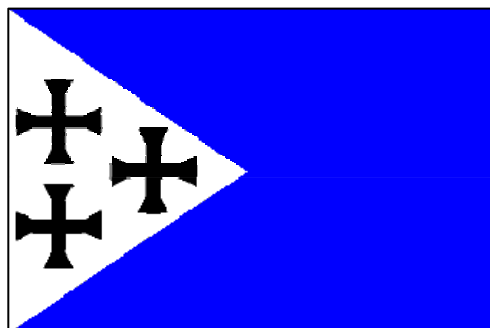


Figure 28 Bergharen municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

To augment the design, sometimes a designer uses the initial letter of the toponym, like the four Ls placed in a Scandinavian cross pattern in the flag of the municipality of Lelystad (figure 29).

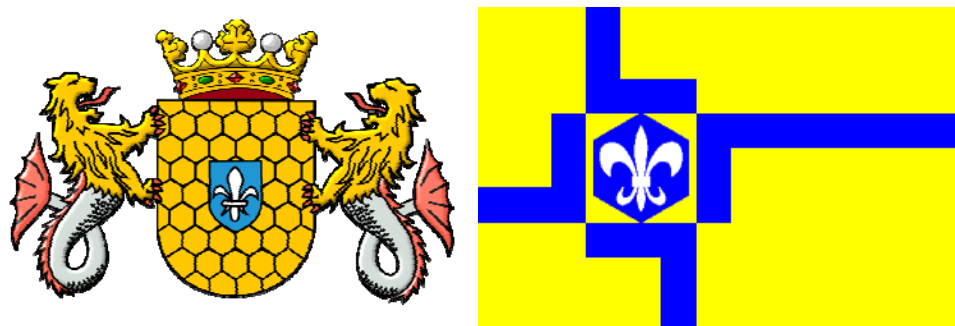


Figure 29 Lelystad municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

The coat-of-arms of the former municipality of Stad Delden, a golden tree on a blue shield (figure 30), is rather common. To the flag, a city crown, referring to the medieval city rights, has been added to make it more distinctive.



Figure 30 Stad Delden municipal coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

An architectural feature still seen around the Netherlands is the bastion fortress, a type of fortification that was intended to be cannonball-proof. The first ones were built in the 16th century. In the 17th century they became very popular. Even complete towns can be contained in them. Characteristically, they have a star-shaped basic pattern with four, five, six, or even more protrusions. They cannot be found on municipal coat-of-arms, but some flags have been augmented with them. The flag of the market town of Gorredijk in Friesland (figure 31) is a fine example, depicting the bastion fortress that protected the town by means of a bastion protrusion.



Figure 31 Gorredijk market town coat-of-arms and flag, the Netherlands

Conclusion

Designing local flags with these principles will lead to distinctive, simple, and recognizable flags that will perform well in outside conditions. The basis is there already: you can use the coats-of-arms or emblem already in existence. The design quality of these flags can be compared to national and subnational flags and will stand out. They will have status by being not sub-par in design compared to those flags of “higher order”. Will these principles reach more countries in the future? Who will follow?

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About the Author



Marcel van Westerhoven was born in Haarlem, The Netherlands, in 1966. After his university education in chemistry and additional education in environmental science, he went on to work for a company that gives advice on sustainable development. His fields of expertise, currently as senior consultant, are materials and waste management, environmental impact assessment, and Corporate Social Responsibility. He is secretary of the *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde* (NVvV, Netherlands vexillological association) and board member of the *Stichting Vlaggenmuseum Nederland* (Netherlands flag museum foundation). He is also a member of the foundation that is responsible for the organization of the forthcoming 25th Congress of Vexillology in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 2013. A member of the NVvV since 1990, he has been editor of *Vexilla Nostra*, the periodical of the NVvV, since 1995. For the successor of *Vexilla Nostra* since 2008, *Vlag!* magazine, he is the editor responsible for the vexillological content. To both *Vexilla Nostra* and *Vlag!* he has contributed many articles on Dutch municipal flags, his field of expertise. He participated in the 2007 and 2009 ICVs, in the last one with a paper.

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