

## Heraldry: An Iconic Language

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Not so long ago, I decided to trace the roots and family origins for my wife and myself. As the first-born, of the first-born, of the first-born in both my father's and mother's families, I felt that my position as a third-generation member gave me the familiarity with the founding members and the present-day generation to act as a link or bridge with the past. As I searched through the records, I realized that the one thing our families did not possess was a coat-of-arms to stand as a symbol of unity through time. I decided to remedy this situation. My wife's family name was Hassenfratz and my mother's was Zarbo. Although the coat-of-arms of the Francavilla family was also constructed, I shall use the first two to illustrate all of the points of interest in this modern-day heraldic construction.

The challenge of creating the family coats of arms coupled with my strong interest in medieval times gave impetus to my efforts. I had read that it is possible for any family to construct its own coat-of-arms as long as the established rules of heraldry were followed. In *Heraldry of the World*, von Volborth writes:

Who is entitled to armorial bearings? [. . .] with certain local exceptions [. . .], everybody has the right to bear arms. This is how it was at the beginnings of heraldry in the Middle Ages, and so it is today (180 .

This paper is the result of my attempt to bring an aspect of the medieval times into some relevance with my life today .<sup>1</sup>

About the time I decided to create the family coats of arms, I had also been developing a theory of cultural icons that I planned to apply to certain aspects of human cultural endeavors. It seemed appropriate to apply the theory to some of the material gathered from the numerous texts on heraldry that I had been consulting. The wealth and diversity of material was somewhat overwhelming at first, but a description of heraldry by von Volborth seemed to fit the premise of the cultural icon theory exactly and could serve as an organizational approach.

In the introduction to his book *Heraldry of the World*, von Volborth states,

It was during the early decades of the twelfth century, between the First and Second Crusades, that nobles, knights and princes began to identify themselves and their equipment, their shields in particular, by the use of *simple* figures in clear, *contrasting* colours, and this must be considered the origin of what is now called heraldry [. . .].

He further states,

The particular characteristics of these new shield devices was (sic the fact that they remained more or less the *same* for each individual and then gradually became *hereditary*, that their use was *extended* to practically all classes and institutions in the community; and that this developed into a detailed and permanent system for the *elaboration* and application of the insignia within a short time (7 .

The words *simplification*, *repetition*, *exaggeration* and *juxtaposition* were the key terms that attracted my attention. Von Volborth seemed to be using these characteristics as major components of the rules of heraldry. Simplification is indicated by the words *simple* and *same*. Repetition is indicated by the words *hereditary*, referring to repetition throughout a family line, and *extended* “to [ . . . ] all classes and institutions,” referring to repetition throughout the culture. Exaggeration is indicated by the word *elaboration*, and juxtaposition is indicated by the word *contrasting*, referring to the colors.

The cultural icon theory that I was developing proposed a commonality to all of human culture based upon the imprinting of these four universal cultural characteristics. They represent the way in which humans pattern their world. The recognition of these patterns gives meaning and can result in producing change and reshaping our environment to establish a desired measure of control. The four cultural characteristics may be thought of as general categories, which are universally distributed throughout the artifacts and seminal ideas that make up our cultural matrix, from music, to art, to literature, etc.. The symbolic representations of heraldry seemed to be a good test case for the theory.

The first step was to establish the rules of heraldry and determine whether they conformed to the four categories of characteristics. If they did, then it would strengthen the premise that any coat-of-arms created as a consequence of these rules would be an example of patterns that derived from the cultural icon theory.

In the turbulent Middle Ages, warfare was the rule rather than the exception. As a result, the cultural phenomenon of the mounted warrior — the knight — was born. The noble knight was the cultural hero of his time and he eventually achieved a mystique that continues to influence our thinking even today. This iconic power has probably never been equaled by fighting men of any other period in history. The knight wore a helmet that covered all or most of his face. This made recognition on the field of battle virtually impossible. Heraldry grew out of a need to precisely identify these fighting men in full armor, and thus prevent confusion in the heat of battle. The creative solution to the problem was a systematic code of precise identification that was gradually developed for the major fighting families

of the Middle Ages. This code subsequently spread to merchants, guilds, clergy, and any other group wishing recognition.

The functional significance of heraldic iconography in the Middle Ages was quite important since literacy was at a low ebb. Not only was it necessary to recognize friend or foe in battle, but it was desirable to recognize the quality of products made by the trade guilds (brand names), to establish legitimacy of family inheritance, and to the sad task of identifying dead or dying knights on the field of battle by their coats of arms.

Because the iconic symbols were gradually organized, according to a set of principles, by members of a group called heralds, and because these symbols were used as a form of communication, medieval heraldry may actually be thought of as a form of language. As such, it consists of symbols that can be manipulated according to a set of rules to achieve meaning. Like hieroglyphics, it is a form of picture writing, and also like hieroglyphics, anyone conversant with the symbols and rules can clearly understand its message.

The rules of heraldry are many and complex, but it is certainly possible to list the more common guidelines, which account for most of the ordinary coats-of-arms. For purposes of illustration, the heraldic coats-of-arms, or “achievements,” can be grouped under the four universal cultural characteristics in the following summary.

### 1 Simplification

- a Heraldic charges (or symbols) are usually of one predominant color, and that color is limited to two “metals” (silver or gold) and five main “tinctures” (blue, red, green, purple, and black).
- b The charges are rendered in the simplest and most direct art form, being stylized and symmetrical. The laws of perspective and proportion do not apply to heraldic icons.
- c The use of as few charges on a field as is necessary for identification is the preferred rule.

### 2 Repetition

- a The main charge may be repeated on various parts of the coat-of-arms achievement in various ways to give emphasis to the meaning. Often, the rule of three plays a role in the design: three lions (e.g., Richard the Lionhearted) or three fleurs-de-lis in a band of one color.
- b Bands of colors may be repeated over and over to give a geometric effect upon a field. Thus, checks, diamonds, wavy lines, or narrow bands may repeat throughout a field background.
- c Secondary charges may be repeated around the borders of the field to embellish the main design.
- d The practice of partitioning, such as halving, quartering, and further subdividing the field, often creates patterns of repetition throughout the entire coat of arms.

### 3 Exaggeration

a The proportions of all charges are stretched or shrunk to fit the area of the field for which they are intended. Thus, a lion may be elongated vertically or horizontally to fill the appropriate band of color on a field, or it may be diminished to fit into a small corner.

b The most important features of the charge are emphasized and exaggerated out of proportion. Thus, the claws of an eagle may be made larger than normal to show a more ferocious pose.

c Charges may be placed together without regard to their true sizes. Thus, a crown may be placed upon the top of a castle, or a lion may be placed next to a castle, both being the same size on the field without regard to the laws of perspective or proportion.

d The charges are usually posed in exaggerated body positions, often related to human stances. This is an attempt to show attitudes, character, or emotion. Thus, a lion may be:

i Rampant - improperly erect, resting upon its sinister hind paw,

ii Coward - standing upon its hind legs, but with its tail down between its legs,

iii Standant - standing on all four legs resting on the ground,

iv Passant - in the act of walking, the dexter paw being raised, the other three paws on the ground,

v Sejant - resting in profile, seated upon its haunches, with forepaws resting on the ground,

vi Couchant - lying down, but head erect and alert,

vii Dormant - lying down, but eyes closed and head resting upon the extended forepaws.

### 4 Juxtaposition

a In the overlapping of colors, only certain types of colors may be juxtaposed upon others. Only metals may be placed upon tinctures and vice versa. This helps to achieve clarity of recognition in the field of battle where colors must be readily distinguishable.

b Colors may alternate in reciprocal order from one side of a shield to another, so that the right side may be seen to be the mirror image of the left in both form and color. Thus, on the right half, a red lion charge on a white field may alternate with a white lion on a red field on the left half.

c The practice of impaling charges over other charges creates a “shock” effect within the field. This is done in the case of “inescutcheon,” where a smaller shield bearing a symbol is placed over the center of the already existing field. This serves to call attention to that symbol above all else.

d The rule of augmentation referring to “canton” places a symbol within its own distinctive field in the upper right corner of the shield, over any other design that may be present. This rule is used when the family has been honored by a monarch for distinguished service.

e Finally, the marks of “cadency” are placed in the most obvious area of the shield, usually the upper right corner, to show the rank of eldest son, second son, etc. This was an important identification because it was related to the inheritance of land and title.

Having been introduced to the basic rules of heraldry and their associations with the cultural icon theory, we now can turn to the task of constructing specific examples of coats-of-arms. The family names of Hassenfratz and Zarbo will provide the our focus in this paper.<sup>2</sup>

The coat-of-arms for Susan Hassenfratz contains two elements: the name, Susan, and the family name, Hassenfratz (see figure 1 . The name, Susan, means “lily.”<sup>3</sup> The lily occurs in many heraldic variations and it was decided to use two of these to emphasize the name by repetition of form. The first is the fleur-de-lis, a reference to France and reflecting the fact that Susan studied French in college. The fleur-de-lis is repeated three times in gold (“or” in the upper or chief section of the shield. Because these represent the first three subdivisions of the field, it was appropriate for a first name. The second form of the lily in white (“argent” was juxtaposed on either side of a white chevron that subdivided the remainder of the blue (“azure” field into three parts. In the base portion of the field, the third part not yet filled, was placed a gold harp, a symbol of music. This was to signify that Susan sang in a choral group for fourteen years. If we were to describe the choice of heraldic charges in literary terms, we would say that Susan is metaphorically represented by a flower and a song. The flower is a simplified symbol repeated five times in two juxtaposed locations. Thus, the heraldic representation of Susan conforms to the universal characteristics of the cultural icon theory.

The name Hassenfratz presents more of a challenge. It is said to be derived from a German term meaning “frowning face.”<sup>4</sup> Family tradition associates the meaning of the German terms *Hassen* and *fratz(e)* with “grimace” or “frowning face.” Consultation with a number of references on the etymology of German names does indeed substantiate this as one possible interpretation (Bach, 291; Betteridge, 164, 219; Davis, 96, 137; Gottschald, 223; Pfeiffer, 370, 514; Schemann, 252, 390; Scholze-Stubenrecht, 364 . Initially, we must differentiate between Hassenfratz and another spelling that is also encountered. The single “s” in the name Hasenfratz imparts a meaning that is not compatible with the family name Hassenfratz with the double “s.” The term *hasen* refers to a “hare,” while

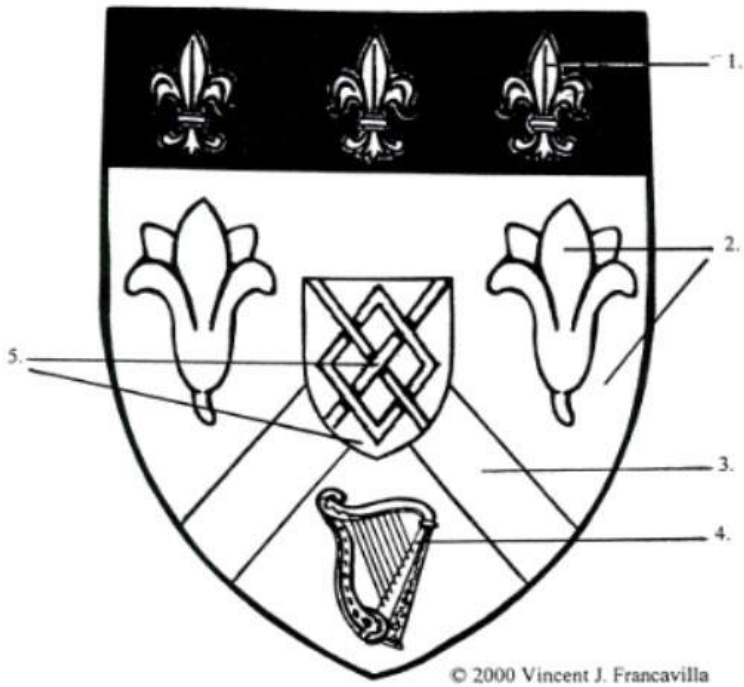


Figure 1. The Coat of Arms for Susan Hassenfratz

1. Three gold (“or” fleur-de-lis on field of black (“sable”
2. Two White (“argent” lilies on field of blue (“azure”
3. White chevron
4. Gold (“or” harp on a field of blue (“azure”
5. Gold (“or” fret on a field of green (“verdant”

the term *hassen* refers to “hate” and the attitudes associated with it. Having made this differentiation, we must acknowledge the fact that local cultural traditions often differ from one area to the next. Word usage can be frustratingly imprecise, allowing for a number of variations. Accordingly, the difference in the double “s” and the single “s” spellings may point to an entirely different origin for the two names or may simply reflect local variation or impreciseness in the rendering of the name. The members of this family cling to the double “S” spelling of the name and the associated connection with the image of the grimacing face.

The term *fratz(e)* means “grimace, distortions, or caricature.” Davis states that the word may be borrowed from Italian *frasche* or French *frasques*, meaning “tricks or hoax,” since it is impossible to trace the word to a satisfactory teutonic source (96). Family tradition contends that there is an Alsace-Lorraine connection to the family history, and this may account for the borrowing from the French. It is also not uncommon to drop a final vowel from a name, transforming *fratze* into *fratz*. We may note that, in the Hassenfratz family, there is a medical history of hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). Some of the family members have been noticed to exhibit symptoms of stressed or contorted facial frowning - a grimacing face - during the occurrence of this condition. It is possible that the family folklore is actually traceable to a genetic predisposition for a medical condition. In any case, the traditional meaning for the family name of “Hassenfratz” does seem to be substantiated by a reasonable interpretation of the definitions encountered in the references. Accordingly, the derivation of the coat-of-arms appears to be in order. This is important because the meaning of the name will be used to select an appropriate symbol for the shield emblem.

In heraldry there exists a symbol or charge called a “fret.” Using a literary pun, we can substitute the fret for the name meaning “frowning face.” In heraldry this is called “canting,” a heraldic pun. Pakula, in *Heraldry and Armor of the Middle Ages*, describes canting arms as [ . . . ] allusive arms. It refers to a playing upon the name of the bearer; often a whimsical reference” (235). Neubecker further describes canting: “The effect of a sign depends on the associations it arouses. A play on words automatically arouses associations; “Canting Arms” in heraldry are seen as an example of these” (982). He also states, “Canting arms have always been popular. In many cases it may require a knowledge of philology or dialects to unravel the source of the pun (118).

Canting arms provide a bridge or linkage from one field of reference to another. It allows us to visually portray the family name, Hassenfratz. The gold fret is juxtaposed directly on top of the white chevron in the center, or fess point, of the shield. This is called “inescutcheon” and has the effect of focusing the coat of arms at a dominant center.

The application of the cultural icon theory may also be viewed at a more basic level involved with the actual formation of a heraldic symbol or

charge. For example, the fleur-de-lis is an iconic stylization of a flower achieved by manipulation according to the four universal cultural characteristics. When the characteristic of simplification is applied to the form of the lily, the result is a reduction in the number of petals and also a restriction of their form to two types: central “bullet” shape and two s-shaped side petals. The body is restricted by a knot-like binding. Repetition then results in the tripling of the image itself, while within the single lily the two s-shaped petals are exact replicas and the base or stem is also repeated in a tri-fold pattern. Exaggeration works with simplification on the lily, again producing the emphasized stem in one central area with two side structures projecting outward. Finally, the universal characteristic of juxtaposition is demonstrated by the two s-shaped petals affixed to opposite sides of the central axis major petal. Thus, we can see that the cultural icon theory works on a hierarchy of levels from the basic formation of the heraldic charges or symbols to their assembly within the field. E. H. Gombrich discusses the importance of this hierarchic principle in his book *The Sense of Order* (7-8). If we think of the lily flower as a thematic core element, then a modification of certain of the external aspects will occur to some degree when the representational matrix of its form is changed to bring certain features into aesthetic harmony. This is the process of iconification. We shall return to the application of the cultural icon theory at the level of the creation of individual heraldic symbols when we discuss the heraldic cross, used in the next coat of arms.

We can now turn our attention to the construction of the Zarbo coat-of-arms. Since the derivation of this coat-of-arms does not depend upon canting, but rather arises from the symbolism of the patron saint and city coat-of-arms, no emphasis need be placed on the actual meaning associated with the name. The basis for the shield goes back to the heraldry of the city Licata, from which the family originated. As is the case with many medieval cities, and in fact, earlier classical cities, a patron deity or saint protects it. In this case, the Church of St. Angelo de Licata is located in the central square and serves as an architectural focal point. Inside the church is displayed the coat-of-arms of St. Angelo (see figure 2). The founder of the Zarbo family in America, Antonio, was an artist by trade and he taught his son, Vincent, portraiture. The right side of the figure showing St. Angelo was painted by Vincent Zarbo. His grandson, Anthony “Rusty” Zarbo, was also an artist, and his rendering of the coat-of-arms for St. Anthony is on the left of the figure. The originals are in the Church of St. Angelo in Licata. Below the paintings, in a small shield, is the coat of arms of Licata, a small coastal seaport. The castle by the sea is a common representation for a coastal city and makes use of the juxtaposition of symbolic elements.





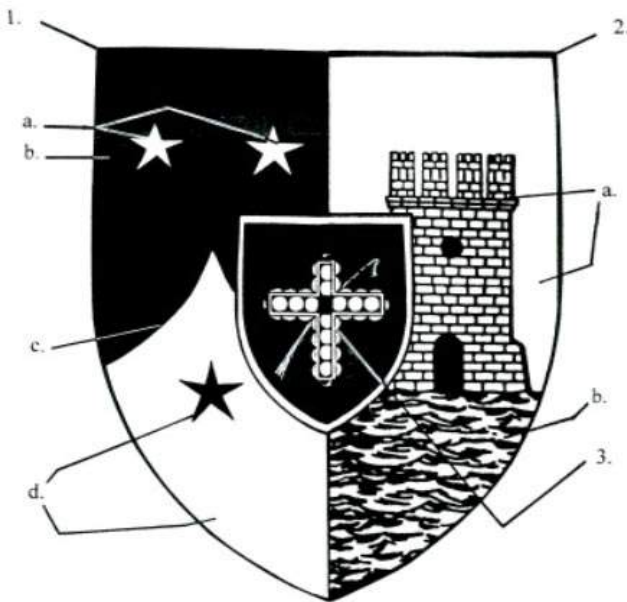
Figure 2. The Coat-of-Arms for St. Angelo de Licata and the City Arms of Licata

Figure 3 shows the juxtaposition of the right and left halves (*dexter/sinister*) that combine to create the coat-of-arms for the Zarbo family. The description is as follows (see figure 3).

1 The shield is divided in half (*per pale*), with the right side of the shield based upon the arms of St. Angelo de Licata. This includes (a) three gold stars (*molets*), with (b) two stars in a field of black above. The dexter field is separated (c) by a modified (bowed) chevron and (d) with a single gold star in a field of light blue below.

2 The sinister field of the shield is based upon the arms of the seaport of Licata. This includes (a) the red (*gules*) castle on a field of white (*argent*) by the (b) blue (*azure*) sea.

An analysis of the charges on the shield reveals that the composition conforms to the four universal cultural characteristics. The castle by the sea is a simplification representing the whole of Licata. In a literary sense, then, it is a synecdoche, or a part representing the whole. The stars are simplifications that repeat over the right side and are in juxtaposition above and below.



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Figure 3. The Coat of Arms for the Zarbo Family

1. Right side: a three gold stars, b. two stars above, c modified chevron, d gold star in field of blue
2. Left side: a red castle, b blue sea, c inescutcheon, Latin Cross

St. Angelo de Licata was a member of a noble house, some of whom may have served in the Crusades in the East. Thus, his coat of arms bears (3 a jeweled (*bezanty* Latin Eastern Mediterranean cross in gold and white on a field of red. In literary terms, the cross is a simplification that represents the crusader who came to the East. This cross symbol is then placed on a shield over the center, in juxtaposition to the rest of the field inescutcheon. The setting of the cross inescutcheon serves at least two purposes. Thematically, it is a mark of distinction referring back to the crusader member of the family. Artistically, it binds together the two halves of the shield with a central focal point reminiscent of the bridging function of the fret on the Hassenfratz shield.

If we return again to the application of the cultural icon theory at the basic level of the creation of individual heraldic symbols, our focus now shifts to a consideration of the heraldic cross, used in the Zarbo coat of arms. E. H. Gombrich discusses the heraldic cross to demonstrate the principle of “graded complication” and it becomes evident that the universal cultural characteristics function in this case (see figure 4 .

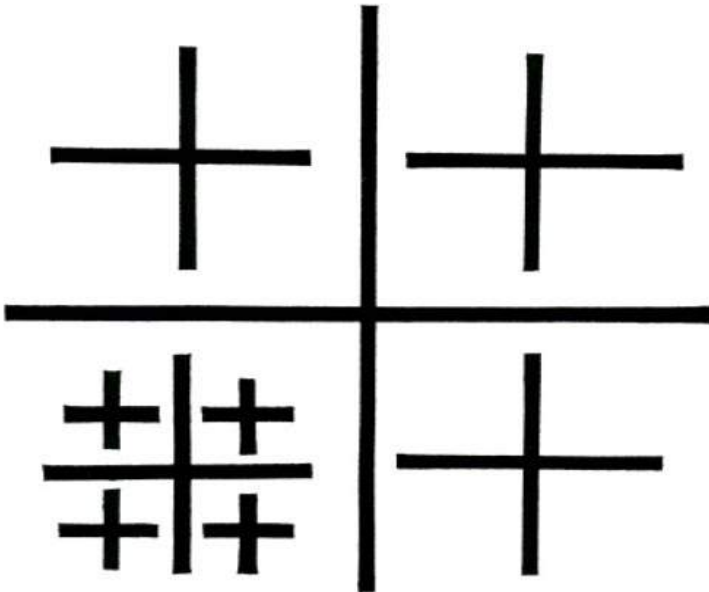















































Figure 4. Simplification of the E. H. Gombrich figure for progressive filling, using the heraldic cross as an example (original diagram from Figure 86, E. H. Gombrich, 1984, 81

It may be useful at this point to reduce the principle to a simplified [simplification] diagram of an extremely monothematic design; starting from an equilateral cross a further such cross can be placed between each of its arms and the procedure continued [simplification and repetition] for as long as the sharpness of the pen and the grain of the paper permit. It would be equally possible to continue outward, framing the first cross by another one, both procedures extending [exaggeration] infinitely [ . . . ] framing, fitting, linking. Any of these procedures of “graded complication” can point the way towards infinity (80).

An interesting result of my research on the heraldic cross used in the Zarbo coat-of-arms was the recognition of the value of the cultural icon theory in demonstrating the full potential for expression of the cross in all its forms. In the creative, expressive language of heraldry, the cross is the most commonly used symbol and thus contains the full variety of iconic forms. Each specific shape of the cross carries with it a special meaning about a family’s history and characteristics and thus proclaims its message to all who are skilled enough to read it.

In figure 5, the inflection of the heraldic cross is studied by means of a Punnet square-like chart. This allows the matching of any universal characteristic of the cultural icon (horizontal row along the top) with a specific locus on the cross (vertical row along the side) to generate a specific final heraldic cross form. The blank boxes in the square represent iconic opportunities, or niches, which can potentially be filled by new representations. If, as an example, we consider the top horizontal row in which the center locus of the cross (i.e., thematic core element) is inflected as it passes through the four forms of the universal characteristics, we generate the following cross icons from left to right. As the centers disappear we obtain: A1a Cross-quartered, A1b Cross-pierced, A1c Maltese cross. As the center multiplies use, we get: A2a Union Jack of Britain. As the center expands, we have: A3a Cross-nowy, A3b Cross-nowy quadrant. As the center is juxtaposed with other elements, we get: A4a Cross-interlaced (Celtic cross), A4b Shield charge over center (inescutcheon).

If, as a further example, we now consider the bottom horizontal row, we can generate a number of other cross icons when all four arms of the cross (thematic core element) are inflected through the four universal characteristics. If we consider square E3, we find expanded arms forming: E3a Cross-pommy, E3b Cross-urdy, E3c Cross-patee, and E3d Cross-potent. If we move to square E2, we generate: E2a Cross-crosslet, E2b Cross-crosslet crossed, E2c Cross-botony and E2d Cross-potent repotent. It should be noted that the cross-bezanty used in the Zarbo coat of arms also belongs in category E2, and a rather similar cross can be found in D2.

UNIVERSAL CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS → ↓ DYNAMIC LOCUS ON ICON	1. SIMPLIFICATION	2. REPETITION		3. EXAGGERATION	4. JUXTAPOSITION			
A. CENTER  	 1a Cross quartered	 St. George	 St. Andrew	 St. Patrick	 4a Cross interlaced (Celtic Cross)			
	 1b Cross pierced	 1c Maltese cross	 2a Union Jack of Britain (3 cross superimposed)		 3b Cross nowy quadrant	 4b Shield charge over center (in escutcheon)		
B. UPPER ARM  	 1a Tau cross or St. Anthony's cross		 2a Patriarchal cross	 2b Papal cross	 3 Cross of St. Peter	 4a Label on cross (designating 1st son)   4b Crown juxtaposed on upper arm of cross		
	C. LOWER ARM  	 1 Cross filched		 2 Cross of Lorraine		 3a Latin cross	 3b Calvary cross (cross on steps)	 4a Templar's cross  4b Globus crucifer  4c Masonic device
D. SIDE ARMS  		 1 Cross of St. George (with side arms reduced)		 2a Cross with side arms bent	 2b Cross with repeating solid circles on arm	 3 Cross with right arm potent & left arm removed	 4 Cross with side arms augmented with axes	
	E. MULTIPLE ARMS  	 1a Cross humetta	 1c Cross moline fimbriated	 2c Cross botomy	 2b Cross crosslet crossed	 3a Cross pommy	 3b Cross urdy	 4a Cross annuletty (rings at ends)
 1b Cross double pitehee (double-pointed edges)		 2a Cross crosslet	 2d Cross potent repent	 3c Cross pattee	 3d Cross potent			

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Figure 5. The Language of Heraldry: The Case of the Heraldic Cross

From this consideration, it appears that the heraldic crosses derive from a process that is iconic in nature. When considered in the context of the cultural icon theory, the thematic core of the cross has a number of dynamic loci through which an evolution or transformation of form may occur. This transformation may be gradual, retaining much of its original form, or it may make great leaps in morphological characteristics due to events, having great impact upon a culture. The cross came into rapid prominence due to the establishment of Christianity. Once it was established as an independent and significant symbol, the Church nurtured its form and codified it as a venerated cultural symbol. From that time on, the morphology of the various heraldic cross forms retained a rather fixed character. This crystallization of form accounts for both the power and inflexibility of the heraldic character. It became an icon frozen in time.

The practice of placing crosses on the shields of crusaders, beginning in the twelfth century, set the precedent for many noble families to adopt a cross as a part of their coats-of-arms. Functionally, the inflection of the many forms facilitated the independent identification of each variation with a specific family. Thus, the powerful cultural icon of the cross became the most frequently used and firmly fixed iconic symbol in the language of heraldry.

The subject of this paper is an odyssey into the world of heraldry. We have seen that, in modern times, any family can establish its own new coat-of-arms if they wish. By simply following the rules of heraldry they can produce a design and then register that design with the proper governmental authority. In the United States that body is the U.S. Coast Guard.

The creation of family coats-of-arms as a lasting tribute to the history of the Hassenfratz and Zarbo families is one example of such. The recognition of their involvement in a much larger pattern of cultural hierarchy, in turn, reflects the application of the four universal cultural characteristics, simplification, repetition, exaggeration and juxtaposition as part of heraldic processes. Finally, because heraldry may be thought of as a form of pictorial language, other aspects of the arts may similarly be analyzed in the context of the cultural icon theory.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Gwendolyn Morgan for suggesting this as a fitting topic for the journal.
2. Since the family coats-of-arms and the case of the heraldic cross diagrams were copyrighted in 2000, the writer is pleased to give permission for use of these figures in this paper.
3. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1963 (1181) lists the name, Susan, in the section on common English given names.
4. Long family tradition identifies Hassenfratz as meaning "frowning face."

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