

## MEDIEVAL PAINTED FLAGS – A STUDY

By Rebecca Robynson

### *Overview*

Much has been written about the shapes and styles of Medieval flags in general, but little attention has been given to the subject of painted flags. While very few examples are still in existence, ample evidence proves that painted flags were plentiful and popular in the Middle Ages.

Initially, flags were primarily used for militaristic and religious purposes, many flags doing double duty in that regard<sup>1</sup>. Later as the system of heraldry evolved, so too did the use of flags for heraldic display. Guilds and cities had their own flags and displayed them in guildhalls and civic buildings, a practice which continues today. Flags were incorporated into civil and religious ceremonies, and individual's flags became abundant, with all manner of nobility having the desire to demonstrate their descent and importance. In 1492 at the funeral of Adolf of Cleves, lord of Ravenstein, four heralds followed behind the coach on horseback carrying four banners, each one bearing one of the four quarters of Ravenstein's nobility, ranked so that "due honor was paid to the grandfather and the mother of the deceased"<sup>2</sup>. In another example, Henry V commanded that ninety banners "painted with the arms of all the kings of Christendom, with multitudes of fanons streamers and valances" grace the carriage at Thomas Becket's tomb<sup>3</sup>. Likewise, the rising merchant class aspired to and imitated nobility, adding heraldic touches to their homes and halls. Non-heraldic flags were also popular. Religious orders like the confraternities commissioned plague banners and banners of other religious motifs (like Corpus Domini<sup>4</sup>) for processions and rites. Flags and flag makers were in great demand as flags became more and more prevalent in daily life.

Medieval flags could be embroidered, appliquéd, or painted (including stamped), depending on their purpose and ownership. Some flags incorporated more than one form of decoration. A late 13<sup>th</sup> - early 14<sup>th</sup> Century St. George banner from San Giorgio church in Velabro in the Vatican is a perfect example. The flag is made of red silk. The design work of St. George rescuing his maiden from the Dragon while the King and Queen look on from a castle window is achieved through appliqué, embroidery, and painted leather to remarkable effect.<sup>5</sup>

While embroidered flags were certainly impressive and durable, they were costly and time-consuming. Flags for display (especially indoors) and meant to impress certainly warranted this type of decoration. In 1243 Henry III commissioned the embroiderer Mabel of St. Edmunds to make for him "a standard of ruby samite, well embroidered with gold and with the images of the Virgin and St. John" to be displayed near the altar at Westminster Abbey. She completed the flag in November of 1244. Depending on

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<sup>1</sup> Wescher, *Flags*, 2809.

<sup>2</sup> Vale, *A Burgundian Funeral Ceremony*, 930.

<sup>3</sup> Evans, *English Art*, 64.

<sup>4</sup> Villers, *The Fabric of Images*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Wescher, *Flags*, 2825-2826.

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when in 1243 she received the commission, it conceivably could have taken Mabel almost two years to complete just one embroidered flag, which cost Henry £10 for Mabel's labor, plus expenses.<sup>6</sup>

Appliquéd flags, on the other hand, could imitate the opulence of embroidered flags but could be mass produced and completed in much less time and with much less expense. In 1300 such flags were produced for Edward I's campaigns in Scotland. Appliquéd Banners with the arms of St. George cost only 1s. each.<sup>7</sup> Hung from atop a pole or lance, exposed to the elements and the enemy, these working flags had little need for the subtle, detailed beauty of embroidery.

Painted flags were inexpensive, more easily mass produced than appliqué flags, and could be achieved even faster when time was an issue. In 1348 Master Hugh le Peyntour of St. Albans painted 300 pennons with the arms of St. George for the King's voyage to Gascony.<sup>8</sup> Master Painter Gilbert Prince was employed by Edward III in 1364 to paint banners for the funeral of Joan, Queen of Scotland<sup>9</sup>. Joan of Arc had a painted linen standard made while on campaign against the English<sup>10</sup>. That is not to say that because they can be accomplished quickly painted flags were necessarily inferior in design or beauty. Painted flags could be quite handsome given the artist's skill and materials, particularly towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century when painting with oils began to supercede the distemper method.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the reason, documented painted flags – commissions, receipts for materials, lawsuits, etc. – are abundant in the late Middle Ages.

A search through Wardrobe accounts and Company Rolls and Records yields some clues as to who painted flags. By the late Middle Ages most artists had organized into Guilds of various type and name, but any skilled artists might be called upon to paint flags for duty or money.

Painters worked in the Great Wardrobe 'mainly [upon] decorative work such as the emblazoning of arms and devices on banners, and the preparation of appropriate embellishments for tournaments, masquerades and other festivities.'<sup>12</sup> Painters in the royal workshops likely used a variety of painting techniques, including stamping. It was often cheaper and more efficient to use dyed cloth as a colored ground, then stamp the desired design onto the fabric. Often times the cloth – be it flag, clothing, or horse-trappings – was stamped in gold or silver. Trumpet pennons provided for the Easter celebration during Edward I's reign were stamped and ornamented with silk fringe in this way.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lancaster, *Artists, Suppliers, and Clerks*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Staniland, *Court Style*, 238.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey, *Some London Painters*, 304.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Folio Society, *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, 82.

<sup>11</sup> Wescher, *Flags*, 2826.

<sup>12</sup> Staniland, *Court Style*, 237.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

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It is interesting to note that the Great Wardrobe [1350-2] account uses the term “pictorum” singularly to describe the painters involved in preparing a quantity of very large streamers and standards for the king’s ships.<sup>14</sup>

Besides painting duties, the artist as designer would also create embroidery designs the King might require for hangings, clothing, etc., and would supervise the process and perhaps assemble the project<sup>15</sup>. Master Hugh, previously mentioned, also painted the King’s ships as well as other flags<sup>16</sup>. Master Thomas Kent painted a chariot for the King’s daughter Philippa in 1403 and Thomas Wryght “provided banners painted with the arms of all the Kings of Christendom and other nobles of different kingdoms of the world, to be placed around the hearse of Henry IV at Canterbury” in 1413<sup>17</sup>.

Perhaps the supervisory role of the artist in the royal workshops was formalized when the official position of Serjeant-Painter was created in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In 1511 John Browne became the first appointed Serjeant-Painter to the king, painting anything the king required, be it house, boat, coach, or flag<sup>18</sup>.

Both royal and non-royal commissions for painted flags were in abundance. *Records of the Worshipful Company of Carpenters* show that Ralph Treswell, painter-stainer and surveyor was commissioned to paint three streamers and a banner in 1567.<sup>19</sup> Thirty-six years later Treswell was hired by the Clothworker’s Company to make a new silk banner of the king’s arms for their use for James I’s coronation<sup>20</sup>. Mapmaker Willem Croock painted standards for Emperor Charles V’s warships<sup>21</sup>. Piero della Francesca, renowned for his work in fresco, was contracted to create a new standard for the Compagnia dell’Annunziata in 1466<sup>22</sup>. Shieldmakers painted both shields and banners for the Burgundian Court<sup>23</sup>. Armorers also made heraldic banners, but armorer Etienne Castel preferred embroidery (1352). Indeed, the Statutes of the Paris Armorers of 1364 lists three types of banners: those sewn of silk (de cousture), those coated with metal (de basture), and those painted in oils (de peinture)<sup>24</sup>. In 1545 the Bruges goldsmith’s guild hired panel artist Adriaen Isenbrant to paint them a new standard<sup>25</sup>. Agnes van den Bossche painted a new standard for the City of Ghent around 1481<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., *Embroiderers*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> See note 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 304 -305

<sup>18</sup> Editorial, *The Serjeant-Painters*, 81.

<sup>19</sup> Schofield, *The London Surveys*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas, *The Painter’s Practice*, ch.4 p.1

<sup>23</sup> Wescher, *Flags*, 2827.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *Workshop Patterns*, 526.

<sup>26</sup> Wolfthal, *Agnes van den Bossche*, 8.

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### *Technique*

It's clear many painted flags were made throughout the Middle Ages. But how were these flags painted? What methods did the artists employ? While most aren't specific to flags, instructions for painting on cloth can be found in a variety of primary sources.

Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte* is an invaluable 15<sup>th</sup> century resource, with several sections pertaining to painting cloth. In "A Section Dealing with Work on Cloth," Cennini describes in detail how to stretch the cloth (linen or silk), size and gesso the fabric, draw on the design with charcoal. He compares the treatment of cloth here to treatment of panel for painting, including a coat of varnish after painting. Cennini says a good clear varnish is necessary "because sometimes these banners, which are made for churches, get carried outdoors in the rain." For more fluid fabric, he has a section called "Various Ways to Do Hangings". Here he states to omit the gesso and varnishing. This set of instructions would seem to be a better option for flag making, since gesso is used to stiffen fabric and the varnish, depending on what it's made out of, may do the same thing. Cennini mentions banners in his chapter on "How To Work In Silk On Both Sides." Here, the drawing is made with charcoal on both sides of the fabric after it is stretched, and then the fabric is sized. Once dry, gilding and/or paint tempered with egg yolk is applied, followed by a coat of varnish. Cennini says "And let this serve for ensigns, banners and all."<sup>27</sup>

Giorgio Vasari gives similar instructions in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Vasari instructs to prime panels or framed canvases with gesso and smooth it out. Once ready, the design can be transferred or else drawn directly onto the support (being canvas or panel). However, he states that if the canvases are not intended to be stationary, gesso is not to be used because it "would interfere with their flexibility, seeing that the gesso would crack if they were rolled up." He instead recommends the canvas be primed with a mixture of white lead, walnut oil, and flour after several coats of size. More coats of size follow the addition of the flour mixture, and the canvas is ready for the design to be drawn in and painted with oils. While Vasari makes no reference to banners or flags, he does elude to the mobility and conveniences of working on canvas, which is lighter of weight and can be rolled up easily for transport, unlike panel<sup>28</sup>.

In 1431 Jehan Le Begue compiled a collection of works on painting, and within the volumes collected are more exciting clues on technique. In the *Manuscripts of Eraclius*, Eraclius gives a detailed account of how to make size from parchment, dip the cloth into it and immediately stretch it out on a panel to dry. After polishing, the cloth should be stretched onto a frame and attached with thread. Paint distempered with size, gum, or egg can then be used<sup>29</sup>. Alcherius in his *De Coloribus Diversis Modis Tractatur* elaborates. He states that linen cloth and sindone (defined here as a very fine linen) must be treated with size made from white chalk, Armenian bole, and saffron, with a little bit of glue water (made from leather or parchment clippings, as in Vasari's directions).

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<sup>27</sup> Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, 103-107.

<sup>28</sup> Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, 230-231, 236-237.

<sup>29</sup> Merrifield, *Medieval & Renaissance Treatises*, 230.

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Draw or paint, and then polish it, and repeat the process, the third coat being sealed with an egg white size. Alcherius is adamant that multiple layers of paint must be added because of the absorptive quality of the fabric. Alcherius scolds “And this flexibility and instability of the cloth or sindone can be corrected and reduced to firmness in no other way than by tenacity and viscosity of the glue laid over them for this purpose.” Hardly what one wants to do when making flags to flap about in the breeze!<sup>30</sup>

Straightforward instructions are to be found in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Bolognese Manuscript. To paint on linen, one should take clean, close linen and stretch it onto a frame. Take whipped egg whites (similar to glair used for illumination), mixed in gum-water, and paint this onto the linen and let it dry. Once dry, paint on the fabric in any manner, letting it dry. This is followed by another coat of the egg-gum wash and lastly followed by a coat of liquid varnish that will make the linen “appear like crystal.” The idea of using varnish on banners is appealing because it protects them from water damage, and if the crystalline effects alluded to here are translucency, that would be perfect if a flag maker did not want to paint two sides of the flag.<sup>31</sup>

It’s clear from these primary sources that the basic steps of cloth painting, and therefore flag painting, are as follows: stretch the fabric onto a frame, prime the fabric with size or size and gesso, add the design to be painted, and paint. Alternative steps are adding more layers of size after painting, and varnishing.

### *Reconstruction*

I have attempted to reconstruct Medieval Painted flags utilizing as many historically authentic methods as possible with as much modern convenience as can be managed. First, I needed to determine the subject matter for the flag. For design, I reviewed the two best primary sources for Medieval flags - *Die Burgunderbeute; Inventar der Beutestucke aus den Schalchten von Grandson, Murten und Nancy, 1476/1477* and *Die “Banderia Prutenorum” das Jan Dlugosz: eine Quelle zur Schlacht bei Tannenberg*. The *Burgunderbeute* is a catalogue of spoils from the Burgundian War of 1476 – 1477 and includes many, many flags, with invaluable descriptions and illustrations. *Banderia Prutenorum* shows the banners that were captured by the Polish army during the battle at Tannenberg against the Teutonic Order on the 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1410.

I chose St. Michael, in a gold frame, with scrollwork on a field of blue.

Once I decided on a design, I made my cartoon. Cartoons were used greatly in the Middle Ages. Constructed of fabric or paper, cartoons were full-size designs that could be utilized for painting, embroidery or tapestry. Vasari mentions them in relation to mural and panel painting<sup>32</sup>. While most examples I have discovered are cartoons for tapestry, in 1384 the Flemish painter Melchior Broederlam was commissioned by Philip

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 260-266.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>32</sup> Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, 215.

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the Bold of Burgundy to make flag cartoons and flags<sup>33</sup>. It makes sense to have a full size template; this helps minimize the potential for errors in transferring the design to the fabric. My cartoon is for a standard, or auncient style flag, 9 feet long. This measurement is consistent with the Maid of Ghent flag painted for the city of Ghent by Agnes van den Bossche in 1481. The standard, currently residing in the Musée de la Byloke in Ghent, measures 4 ells long<sup>34</sup>. As this is a Netherlandish work, the ell here measures 27 inches, unlike the English ell which equals 45 inches. This means the Ghent Standard is 108 inches, or 9 feet long.



Figure 1. The cartoon is for two Standards, 45" high by 9' long, arranged so as to fit on the rectangular piece of silk.

Although medieval painted flags were made of linen, wool and silk, I chose silk as my fabric support, because of its sheerness and flowability. The type of silk used is 8mm (mm = momme, indicating the weight of the fabric) Flat Crepe. Flat Crepe has a smooth, satin side. It is similar to Habotai silk, but has a nicer weave. 8 mm is lightweight yet has enough heaviness to give it drape.

While some banners were not two-sided (perhaps they were only meant to be displayed against a wall or backdrop), flags meant to be flown had two sides. The Ghent flag previously mentioned has two identical sides. The Ghent Standard is constructed of two pieces of linen canvas, painted, and sewn together<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, Cennini mentions painting fabric that is meant to be two sided, though his instruction would seem to indicate that it is the same piece of fabric, since the artist is meant to place the fabric so that the sun shines through the drawing onto the back side<sup>36</sup>. Another reason I chose the 8mm Flat Crepe is that it is sheer enough that the design and colors should show through nicely, without having to paint the backside.

At this point, a Medieval painter would stretch the fabric onto a frame, prime and/or size it, and then transfer the design. I chose instead to transfer my design first. Because I was

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<sup>33</sup> Wescher, *Flags*, 2828.

<sup>34</sup> Wolfthal, *Agnes van den Bossche*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, 106.

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going to use pencil to transfer my design, I did not need sizing to fix charcoal to the surface of the fabric.



Figure 2: The cartoon is easily seen underneath the silk.

If the design was not to be initially drawn directly on the fabric, several methods for transferring designs are known. One such method is the use of tracing paper. Cennini gives instructions for making one type of tracing paper by scraping kid parchment evenly and oiling it for translucency<sup>37</sup>. Alcherius gives an ingenious recipe for making tracing paper out of glue. Grease a stone and apply layers of melted glue to it and let it dry.<sup>38</sup> Afterwards, lift up the corners and peel it off! Vasari utilizes a carbon copy method. Place a sheet of paper covered with black (Black what? Vasari doesn't specify. Perhaps charcoal?) on top of the fabric and under the cartoon. Once they are stabilized, take a stylus and mark the cartoon outlines firmly<sup>39</sup>. Another method, used also in transferring designs onto walls, manuscripts, and panels, is pouncing. In pouncing, the outlines of the cartoon or design are pricked. The design is then laid over the primed surface. A cloth bag full of charcoal dust is then "pounced" on the design, like a series of dabs. When the perforated cartoon is removed, small dots of charcoal remain on the surface<sup>40</sup>. The artist can then connect the dots! Painter Adriaen Isenbrant utilized this technique. He was sued on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1545 by his clients, the goldsmith's guild, when he took their old standard, which he was to use as a model for the new commissioned standard, and ruined it by pouncing. While it is unclear whether he poked holes directly in the old standard to use it as a template, or whether he put a piece of paper on top of it and pricked both paper and flag, the fact is that the goldsmith's were furious at the desecration of their beloved standard<sup>41</sup>.

Using a semi-soft pencil, I traced my design onto the silk prior to framing so that I could utilize a hard surface for my tracing. The silk is very sheer and once laid on top of the cartoon, its outlines were easy to follow. Now it was time for framing.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>38</sup> Merrifield, *Medieval & Renaissance Treatises*, 292.

<sup>39</sup> Vasari, *Vasari on Technique*, 231.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, *Workshop Patterns*, 523.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 525.

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Cennini says to nail the fabric onto the frame, then stretch it out with tacks<sup>42</sup>. Eraclius states to fix the fabric to the wooden frame “with the thread<sup>43</sup>.” I believe this to mean that there are hooks or loops on the wooden frame, and thread attached to the fabric is then laced through the hooks or loops in order to secure it to the frame, similar to some embroidery frames. Although the method is unknown, clearly the Standard of Ghent was stretched on a frame; stretch garlands are clearly visible at the sides of the flag<sup>44</sup>. I chose to use a combination of both methods. I took strips of old cotton cloth – waste fabric, -- and sewed it onto the silk, making a frame of cotton cloth all the way around the silk. I then stapled the cotton cloth to the wooden frame. I used waste fabric for several reasons. Firstly, it maximized my use of the silk – since the silk is not touching the frame, none of the silk was spoiled by staple holes or by paint running along the frame and backstaining the silk. Secondly, it provided tight, even tension. The tight, even tension helps prevent paint from pooling and possibly running down the silk.

I chose to follow the Bolognese Manuscript instructions for sizing the fabric. After much trial and error I created a size that worked from reconstituted whipped egg whites and a very, very small amount of egg yolk. I omitted gum-water, because I did not have any, but hope to continue testing once I’m made a quantity. Using sponge brushes, I saturated the silk with the egg size.



*Figure 3: After transferring the design and adding the waste fabric, the silk is stapled to the frame. In this photo the silk has been sized with egg and has dried. Maul sticks rest across the frame, ready to add arm support during painting.*

While medieval flags would be painted with watercolor, distemper paints and oils, I chose instead to use modern dyes (I hope to conduct future tests with medieval dyes) for several reasons. First, the dye should saturate the fabric, eliminating the need to paint the reverse side and second, the colors are much clearer and brighter than watercolor or opaque paints. Opaque paints have body that will weigh the silk down; the dye has much less matter.

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<sup>42</sup> Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, 103.

<sup>43</sup> Merrifield, *Medieval & Renaissance Treatises*, 230-232.

<sup>44</sup> Wolfthal, *Agnes van den Bossche*, 8.

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*Figure 4: St. Michael is carefully painted on the silk using dyes instead of opaque paint.*

My egg size proved successful – the dye did not run or spread. Because of the size, the backside of the flag is slightly less bright, the dye not having soaked through completely, but it still looks great in the sunlight.



*Figure 5: The two Standards have been painted. Once dry, they will be removed from the frame and steamed to set the dye, and then sewn.*

As this flag is meant to fly outside, there is a matter of waterproofing it. It would appear from our instructional guides above that varnishing was one method of waterproofing. Coating the fabric with wax may have been another. Wax was likely a common re-waterproofing agent for linen fenestralls (medieval window panels that covered windows in lieu of glass), already translucent from their treatment of alum, hot sheep's fat and rosin<sup>45</sup>. Several accounts suggest that wax might have been used for waterproofing flags as well. Court accounts for Philip the Good list expenses for flags and includes wax-candles and tallow candles<sup>46</sup>, although there is no description of whether or not this was used *on* the flags. Likewise the Great Wardrobe accounts of 1342-3 specify wax was purchased along with pigments for work on streamers and standards. The Wardrobe does say the wax is to be used for sealing, presumably of the flags<sup>47</sup>. While I plan on testing medieval varnish recipes in the future, I chose instead to set the dyes I used in order to make the flag water-friendly if not waterproof. The results were stunning.

<sup>45</sup> Kightly, *Barley Hall York*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Wescher, *Flags*, 2829.

<sup>47</sup> Staniland, *Court Style*, 240-241.

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Figure 6 One Standard is laid out to dry after steaming and washing. There is no backstaining due to bleed. Note this is the reverse side of the flag.

### Conclusion

Painted cloth in the form of flags was a large part of the overall fabric of medieval society and was incorporated into many important life events. Though few examples survive, vast amounts of documentation prove their prevalence as a form of heraldic and religious display. Painted flags could be easily produced and can be easily reproduced in a modern setting using fairly accurate historical methods of reconstruction.



Figure 7: Detail of St. Michael shows the brightness and intensity of color achieved by using dye.

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