

Heraldic Banner: The 15th C. Tournament Banner

Background:

The term Banner has its origins in the Middle English word *banere*, which in turn is from Old French of Germanic origin. By definition it is “a piece of cloth attached by one edge to a staff and used by a leader (as monarch or feudal lord) as his standard”.¹ However, it has come to mean, in modern usage, any form of flag or pennant. This creates some confusion, but within this document it will be referencing its original definition. A Standard is a long tapering flag used in battle and did not display the full arms of the feudal lord.²



Portion of “Ladies watching tournament”. From *Traite de la Forme et Devis comme ou fait les Tournois* by Rene d’Anjou, 15th C. – page 118-9, Koch.

Banners show the complete private coat of arms of the owner³. The entire surface should show the arms.⁴ It is oriented so that the arms are viewed properly with the left side of the banner along the staff. This is because the banner represents the field of the shield, and

¹ Mirriam-Webster Online <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=banner&x=0&y=0>

² Fox-Davies, page 474.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

thus, the staff side is presumed to be dexter.⁵ On the backside, the reverse arms would be displayed.



The size of a banner appears to have changed over time. In the pictures of the early knights going on Crusade, the height appear to be 2x width.⁶ In the banners shown during the 15th C. the tournament banners are depicted with the length being about a quarter to half longer. Field banners are shown as being square. At the time of Elizabeth I's death, personal banners are also square.

“Medieval Siege” from *Chroniques de Foissart*, 14th C., page 82, Koch

The primary purpose of the banner is to locate and identify the lord. Its overall size will vary with the function it is to fulfill. Thus a banner to be flown in the field will be smaller than the banner to be flown from the castle. The banner to be carried into battle also be smaller. The banner may also be carried by either the lord or by an appointed banner bearer. Whether the banner is to be carried by a person on foot or on horse will also affect the size.

During the 15th C. banners and standards were also attached to trumpets that were used to announce major events. They were then emblazoned with the arms or symbols (in the case of a badge) of the Lord that was hosting the events and corresponded to the heraldry displayed on the tabards, other decorations for the event, or the heraldry of the lord being announced⁷.



Banners and standards were frequently bordered or fringed with the livery colors, giving an effect of what Fox-Davies calls “bordure compony”.⁸ This decoration may be a true bordure compony that may indicate illegitimacy or cadence if part of the actual heraldic charge or may only be decoration.⁹ One example

⁵ Fox-Davies, page 476.

⁶ Koch, page 90-91 – “The Sultan’s Guard” from *Seances d’Harari*, Arab ms. 13th C. and page 103 Knights of the Holy Ghost – after a 14th C French miniature from the “Statutes of the Holy Ghost at Naples”.

⁷ Holme, pages 88-89, “Entrance of the Four Judges” from *Livre des Tournois* by Rene d’ Anjou, 1460-65.

⁸ Fox-Davies, page 474.

⁹ Fox-Davies, pages 139-140.

is the illustration of “the great imbrodered banner of England” prepared for Elizabeth I’s funeral.¹⁰

Construction:



King-of-arms holding the four banners, from the *Livre des Tournois*. (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

15th C. from page 97, Koch.

The banners were made from silk, linen, and wool. Few period ones remain in existence. This one from Hardwick Hall is felted wool with the design painted on.¹¹ Staniland talks about the involvement of the artist/designers in the actual painting of heraldic banners as 14th C in the London workshops as well as in the noble houses.¹² In talking about household accounts, Staniland states “Amongst the expenses listed are numerous references to artists, the most highly paid group within the workforce and present in some numbers. For the greater part of their time these artists painted heraldic flags and horse coverings for the king’s wars or jousts, or stamped the same sort of decoration in gold or silver on fine silk, again for flags or horse coverings...”¹³



¹⁰ Synge, page 102.

¹¹ Levey, page 23.

¹² Staniland, pages 21-22.

¹³ Staniland, page 22.

In the early 15th C., Cennino Cennini, a Florentine painter, produced a manual *Il Libro dell' Arte*¹⁴. Sections deal with working on cloth for painting and gilding, in particular linen, silk, velvet, and wool; including for banners. His steps in section CLXII through CLXVII include stretching the fabric into a frame, preparing with a base such as gesso for light colored fabrics, drawing the design onto the fabric, painting “in the usual way, tempering the colors with yolk of egg, layering the colors in many times, ...varnishing afterward, but preferably with oil mordants.” (CLXV). Cennini includes information on how to paint fabric on both sides.

Banners are shown by artistic convention to display the arms as clearly readable by the audience, especially when the people in the painting are important or historic figures. This has led to much confusion as to whether the banners either have some form of rod across the top to hold it out, have some form of stiffener in the fabric itself, or are 1 or 2 pieces of fabric without anything else added. The pictures from *Livre des Tournois* by Rene d' Anjou, 1460-65, show the banners draping in “Review of the helms”¹⁵ and both waving and out stretched in “The melee”¹⁶. Considering the difficulty of carrying a banner on an 8', or better staff, while mounted, using anything more than a piece or back to back pieces of fabric is impractical and I choose not to add a cross bar or stiffening.



Review of the helms. Ladies of the court join the judges in their cluster to inspect the helmets of



If a knight had offended a lady, she would point to his helm and, if found guilty, he would then be punished.

¹⁴ <http://www.noteaccess.com/Texts/Cennini/> - Translated by Daniel V. Thompson, Jr., New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1933, by Yale University Press

¹⁵ Holmes, pages 91-92.

¹⁶ Holmes, pages 94-95.



Steps Taken for This Banner's Construction:

Fabric – cotton. Linen canvas would have been a historically correct choice, but that would have required that the whole banner be painted. I chose to substitute cotton dyed in the appropriate base colors. Also as the fabric was a bit thin, I chose to use two pieces of fabric, back to back.

Paint and Painting – acrylic. Using acrylic also obviated the need to put down a base coat on the fabric and a finishing varnish. I thinned the acrylic a bit with water so that the fabric would absorb the paint. The fabric was tacked to a frame. The outlines were drawn on the fabric and then filled in with the paint. Then as suggested in Cennini, I worked in layers of paint until the appropriate level of color was achieved. Then the final details were added to the figures.

Construction – Once the panels were painted, the top and bottoms were sewn together. The panels were placed back to back and the border was added around 3 sides. The staff sleeve was then added on the 4th side. As most of the banners do not show any ornamental top, the sleeve top was sewn closed.

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[extract from Chapter V – Heraldry – section Flags shown at

<http://www.kwantlen.bc.ca/~donna/sca/flags/norris.html#banner>]

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