

Monsho, Hereditary Crests

Before people could read, they relied on symbols. In early times, symbols were a useful means of communication. They might appear on shields and banners, to identify friend and foe during battle. Symbols marked personal possessions and clothing, and they probably imparted associations of power, strength, or luck as well. Symbols identified trades people and advertised their wares in the market. It was important that a symbol be recognized easily by anyone; therefore, it was usually a simple design, rendered in high contrast colors for visibility.

Crests in Japan:

In early Japan (Heian Period), family crests, called Monsho, were used to decorate and identify ox-carts, clothing, utensils, lanterns, and gravestones. The earliest insignia were probably based on ideograms or picture writing. Quickly sketched on banners and carts with a brush, they provided a simple reference. Later (Kamakura Period) crests were derived from plants, animals, natural phenomena (like lightning), household utensils, architectural ornaments, geometric patterns, and religious symbols. The Konoe family, which traced its lineage back into ancient times, chose the peony, an elegant shape, for their crest. The Saionji house preferred the abstract "comma" pattern. Warrior families often incorporated a sword into their crest design. The images also had symbolic meaning, and the design of a family crest was an important consideration. Having the symbol around you every day served as protection and good fortune. For that reason, crests showed up on personal and family possessions.

As time went on (late Kamakura and early Muromachi Periods), symbols changed to reflect prosperity, shifting family allegiances, and important marriages. During times of peace, the crest became more of a reflection of family status. Fashion and changing styles led to embellishment of the original crests. They became elegant and ornamental, reflecting the ideals of the nobles. As families branched out, they might want additional crests derived from the original design. Two families united by marriage might also unite their crests. Sometimes a circular or square border was added to the original motif. The motif could also be repeated two, three, or even four times. Sharpening or rounding the edges of the motif gave the design a new look. The angle of view of the motif could be rotated, or new elements could be added.

With the rise of merchant families in the Edo period, crests underwent another change. Designs might be based on historical events, famous places, or people. Merchant talismans or even visual puns and puzzles based on the business of the family provided inspiration for crests. Enclosing an ideogram in a circle, square, or hexagon and stenciling it on curtains or banners both identified and decorated the storefront. In addition, employees might wear coats emblazoned with the family business crest. Flamboyant designs and varied colors suited the tastes of the merchant class. Their crests were witty and energetic, reflecting the life of the marketplace.

Crests in Europe

The heraldic crests of medieval Europe were emblazoned on shields and banners to identify armies during battle. At first, the designs were very simple--crosses, stripes, etc. Later, they became more complex. Designs based on plants and animals were chosen for their associations with loyalty, bravery, or luck. Eagles were associated with Charlemagne, broom plants with the Plantagenets, and roses with the houses of York and Lancaster. Crests were not only important in battle, but were also used to ornament everyday objects. The designs were embroidered on clothing, woven into tapestries, and carved into walls and furniture.

Modern Symbols and Crests

Identification is one way we still use symbols. They are all around us. Traffic signs take advantage of universally recognized symbols, such as arrows and Xs; shapes and colors also show us what to do and warn us of hazards. We rely on these symbols just as soldiers in battle relied on their banners and shields. McDonald's golden arches, the NBC "eye", and the Prudential "rock" are other familiar symbols that impart information.

Symbols are still used to protect and bring good luck, or to convey an emotion or wish. Clovers, hearts, butterflies, Xs and Os, or smiling faces are examples of symbols which use visual shorthand for a deeper meaning.

Symbols as decorative elements can become artworks in their own right. A simple shape standing on its own can be an elegant and powerful image. It can be repeated in a variety of patterns. Designers and artists sometimes use a motif as an identifying mark or a design element in their work. Business and corporation logos convey stability, status, and prestige.

Designing Your Own Crest

These three associations, identification, symbolism, and design, should be kept in mind as students begin to brainstorm their own personal or family crests. Ideas generated through class discussion or writing exercises can be turned into "motifs." Sketches which incorporate a letter of their name, a pun or puzzle on their name's original meaning, or an object that has some personal or family meaning can be a starting point.

Cutting a motif from paper simplifies the shape, and the motif can be turned, repeated, or combined with other motifs. By folding paper in half and cutting the design, a symmetrical shape can be made. Paper folded into fourths can be cut into a simple radial shape. By cutting one of these shapes apart on the fold lines, it can be deconstructed and recombined. Students can experiment with enclosing the motif in a circle or a square, sharpening or rounding its edges, or adding cut paper details.

After the personal crest is finished, it may be transferred to a stencil. Stencils allow the crest to be repeated as often as needed, and in Japan, stencils cut from mulberry paper are part of the traditional art form called katazome.

Extensions:

Younger children can cut a monsho from paper and mount it on contrasting paper.

Banners can be made from felt monsho glued onto larger pieces of felt or by the katazome method on cotton fabric.

Fabric paint can be applied with sponges through a monsho stencil.

Design a class crest and stencil it on T-shirts for everyone; use the teacher's name or a special shared experience (field trip, favorite book or activity) for design ideas.

Resources:

Mizoguchi, S. (1973). *Arts of Japan I: Design motifs*. New York: Weatherhill.

Nakano, E. and Stephen, B.B. (1982). *Japanese stencil dyeing: Paste-resist techniques*. New York: Weatherhill, Inc.

Vocabulary:

Monsho (or mon): Japanese hereditary crest

Motif: A simple shape or single design which can be repeated

Crest: An identifying emblem

Katazome: The Japanese art of patterning fabric using a resist paste (kata=stencil; zome=to dye)

Ideogram: A picture or symbol used in a system of writing

Stencil: An impervious material perforated with a design through which ink or paint is forced on a surface to be printed.