

Imprese: Body and Soul

- Picture and a motto
- Not reserved like heraldry
- Pictorial
- Individual
- Picked for an occasion or mood
- Copying is encouraged
- Witty
- Puzzle/game aspect
 - Part of tournament culture
- Part of decorative art: embroidered, painted, carved, sewn

I'm Impressed By Your Impresa: Fun with unoriginal heraldry

I got a little obsessed with Mary Queen of Scots embroidery. Wait-- what? What does that have to do with heraldry? What's an impresa? What's going on here? Does this have something to do with me needing to memorize more French names for colors? Am I going to have research something and wait a year to use it? ACKKKKKKK!

Breathe. Really. Breathe. Let's take this slow. I really am going to start with Mary Queen of Scots and her embroidery, but there are going to be fighting, code breaking, pageantry, battle cries and fun for all. I promise. Not to mention a fun piece of heraldry you can use as soon as we're done. Honest. It's even period.

So, I got obsessed with some embroidery. The Oxburgh Hangings from Hardwick Hall to be exact. Mary embroidered a variety of things that were appliquéd together onto green velvet. There are animals, flowers, and large panels full of symbols and Latin mottos. Somewhere in skimming the info on them I encountered the concept that she had put coded messages into the embroidery. Really? Embroidery is cool and cloak and dagger like? James Bond does petit-point?

Well, not exactly, but sort of. Mary used emblems and mottos in her embroideries to send encouragement to her supporters and make very symbolic gifts, but it wasn't like she was weaving microfilm into the borders. Instead, she utilized a very popular form of expression at the time, the impresa.

Imprese (that's the plural form,) are personal emblems sort of like badges but more involved. In order to be an impresa, the image needs to have a picture and an accompanying motto. The two relate to each other really closely. Basically, the picture illustrates the motto. But, there's a catch. It's not supposed to be literal, but rather a symbolic illustration. Confusing? Sort of. It was actually kind of a game to understand the pictures. The more you found and got the witty choices in the illustration the hipper you were. We'll come back to this idea. Let's talk about the history of imprese and how they were used for a minute first.

Imprese first started to be used in the late 14th Century in the French and Burgundian royal courts and spread all over Europe quickly. They became so popular that they were actually used to identify individuals more often than official heraldry. Imprese had the advantage of being changeable and exchangeable. You could have more than one. You could change impresa as your mood and interest changed. You could even borrow someone else's that you liked and use theirs as is or adapt it a little. Imprese were used about any way a device would be used, including being displayed on tournament shields.

By the time Elizabeth I took the throne in England, combatants were required to have an impresa to fight in a tournament at all. They were also supposed to have an accompanying song or poem. Conveniently, they didn't have to come up with an original one. An artist or poet could be hired to create one; the fighter could use someone else's or take one from a published book of emblems. The ones in the books even came complete with accompanying poem.

Let's say that you were interested in making your own impresa though, what would you need to do? First, you need a motto. The motto is supposed to be in a language other than your primary language. This is a game, remember, and there is supposed to be a bit of obscurity. Unlike heraldry, you aren't supposed to just glance at the guy across the field and know whether you are supposed to kill him or not. This is about whiling away some boredom and being cool and interesting. It's supposed to be something to solve. It does have to be solvable though, so don't get too obscure. Next, you need an image. Again, this varies from a device in that it is supposed to be a picture. It's not just a symbol or two arranged in a prescribed way. This is an actual picture. It can be detailed and it's supposed to be visually pleasing. You get bonus points for using the natural world.

Just to give you some examples, here are some of Mary Queen of Scots. One of the so called coded messages was a hand with a pruning hook cutting a vine with the motto, “Virescit Vulnere Virtus,” translating to “Virtue flourishes by wounding.” It was the subject of an embroidery she gifted to the Duke of Norfolk as sort of an extra encouragement to the plans for their marriage. The pruning hook is supposed to refer to Elizabeth I and her childlessness in need of pruning. Needless to say, Elizabeth didn't take too kindly to the sentiment, and the embroidery was used as evidence against Mary and Norfolk. Mary's most famous is a tortoise climbing a palm tree with a crown on top. The motto translates to “Glory gives strength.” The tortoise is supposed to represent her husband Darnley trying to get a little higher in the world.

An example of stealing a favorite impresa of someone else and adapting it a bit can also be found in Mary's embroideries. She borrowed from her first husband's sister Marguerite. It shows a marigold upturned to the sun. Marguerite used the motto, “Non Inferiora Secutus” (Not following lower things). Mary changed the motto to use an anagram of her name, “Sa Virtu m'Atire,” which translates to “Its strength draws me.”

So, there you go. This can be as easy or difficult as you like. You can pick an interesting motto, add your favorite flower, bird, tree or animal. You can pick something that appeals to you from the dozens of examples available and outright steal it with abandon. You can craft a strange and obscure image designed to tick off your nearest relatives and all with the security that you are following in the footsteps of late period European aristocracy.

Embroider it, paint it; sew it to your kid's clothes as part of your personal livery. Have fun with it, because imprese are fun. They're meant to be something that makes a statement about who you are right this minute. If nothing else, they certainly give you some options why you wait to see if your device is registerable by the heralds.

If you are interested at looking at collections of emblems, there are several projects concerned with publishing emblem books online. The English Emblem Book Project is located at <http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/home.htm>

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has a portal with links to a variety of other emblem projects in multiple countries and languages <http://media.library.uiuc.edu/projects/oebp/>

For further reading check out:

<http://www.doomchicken.net/~ursula/sca/imprese/imprese.html> A quick summary from an SCA lady on imprese. She also has examples of impresa that she has designed and drawn herself

[Emblems for a Queen: The Needlework of Mary, Queen of Scots](#) by Michael Bath. This was my introduction to emblems and imprese. Besides going in depth into the sources and explanations of the imprese and emblems used by Mary for her embroideries, it has wonderful full color pictures of the embroideries.

[The English Tournament Impresa](#) by Alan Young. The standard work on the subject

Non Inferiora Secutus

"Not having followed lower things"

Marguerite Navarre's
badge/impresa published in
Claude Paradin's *Devices
Heroiques*



Oxburgh hanging
octagon embroidery
by Mary Queen of
Scots.

Same impresa used
by 3 women:
Marguerite, Mary of
Guise, and Mary,
Queen of Scots





Shepherd Buss embroidery with emblems from Paradin

Fulmen aquasque fero
--I bear lightning and
waters

Portrait of George Clifford, Earl of
Cumberland

Nicholas Hilliard

Tournament shield on the tree.

Tournament armor.

Queen's glove pinned as a favor to his
hat.





*Reconduntur non
retunduntur*

"Laid aside, not
blunted"

Portrait of Sir Edward Hoby
Unknown artist

Impresa in corner. Lady
holds a scroll with the motto
referring to the armor in the
foreground.

Dressed in armor with
heraldry in other corner



Non sine sole iris

"No rainbow without
the sun"

Rainbow Portrait of Elizabeth I
Isaac Oliver

Masque costume

John Davies "Hymns to Astrae"

Elizabeth is the image

Eyes and ears

Wildflowers

Rainbow=peace

Serpent of Wisdom holding the heart

Celestial sphere

Moon imagery



Milo of Croton

Pageant shield from 1470's
Antonio Pollaiuolo

Molded gesso with gilding



Masque Costume Design

Inigo Jones 1610

Nunquam procrastinandum
"Never postpone anything"
Alciato's Book of Emblems first published 1531



Accompanying poem

The elk raises the sign of the Alciato family, and it bears in its hooves "Never postpone anything". It is known that Alexander answered thus to one who asked him how he had accomplished so many deeds in a short time. By never being willing to delay, he said. And that is the meaning of the elk, for you might wonder if it is stronger, or swifter.

Prudens magis quam loquax
"Wise, rather than wordy"



In Cecropian Athens, its symbol the night-owl excels among birds for her wise counsel. She is deservedly consecrated to the service of arms-bearing Minerva, a post the chattering crow had earlier yielded up.

Maturandum

"One ought to move swiftly"



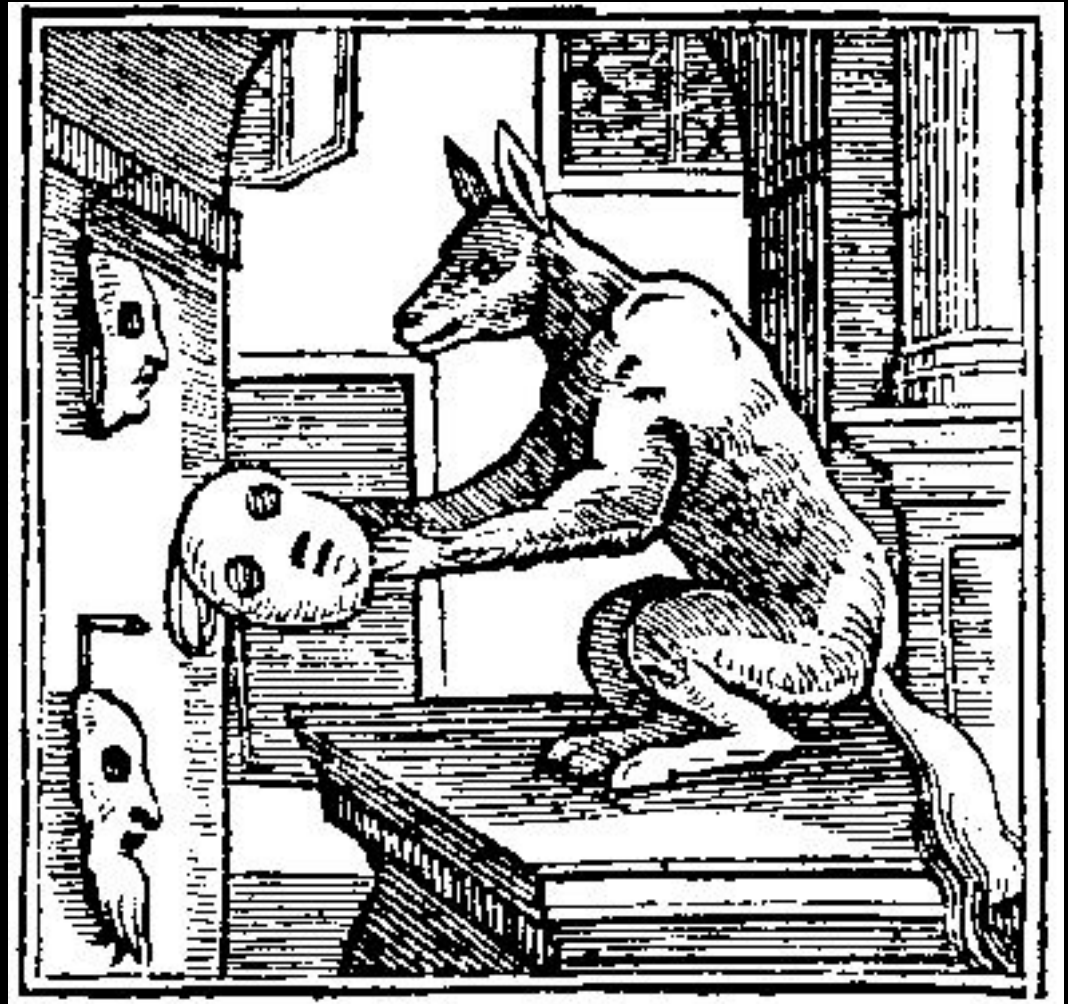
They command all men to hasten quickly, and to slow down! - neither too hasty, nor too long in delay. May a javelin, wrapped by a remora, show this to you: the remora is sluggish, the darts fly forth, sent by the hand.

Unum nihil, duos plurimum posse
"One man can do nothing; two can do much"



The son of Laertes, the son of Tydaeus: side by side the talented hand of Zenalis drew them on this wax tablet. The former prevails in the sharpness of his wit, the latter excels in strength. Even so, one is not lacking in the talent of the other. When the two come together, victory is certain. But a mind or right hand by itself, each can fail a man.

Mentem, non formam, plus pollere
"Mind, not outward form prevails"



A fox entered a theatre director's store-room, and found a human head skilfully finished, so elegantly made that the only thing wanting was breathing; in other ways it was like a living creature. Taking it up in her paws, she said: "Oh, what a head is this! - But it has no brain!"

Autor ego audendi.
I am the author of being bold.



This

Colligavit nemo.

Hitherto no man hath conquered me.



There is vied to this day certaine brasen
money with the image of Augustus Cæsar on
it, vpon the one side wherof is the portraiture

F. of

Unica semper avis.

But alwayes one Phenix in the world at once.



Theoph. Like as the Phenix wherof there is but one at any time to be seene, is a rare bird, so all good & precious things are hard to be found. These armes the famous and renowned woman, & Lady Helionora of Austria vsed, which was the widow of Francis king of France.

Poco à poco.

By little and little.



The grasse groweth and increaseth vppon
 the ground, and yet no man can perceiue his
 increase: so honestie and vertue cannot easi-
 lie be perceiued but by example & practise.

Aemula

that as the Phenix is alone her selfe in the world, so she being made a widow by y^e death of her husband, voweth her selfe to liue for euer with God alone.

Pas à pas.

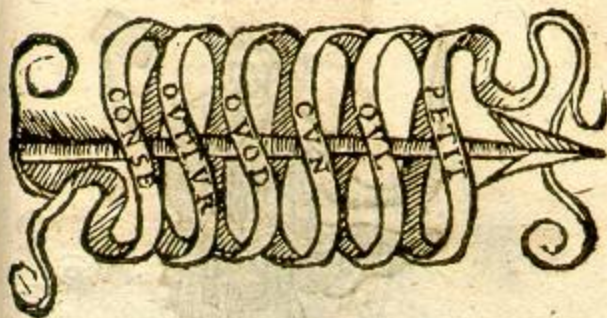
Foote by foote.



Renatus king of Sicilie desirous to haue it knowne that he conceiued hope to become a mightier prince then yet hee was, and to escape and overcome all dangers and difficulties,

Consequitur quodcumque petit.

She obtaineth whatsoeuer she desireth.



Diana of Pictrauia dutcheffe of the Valentinensis ascribed a dart to her selfe (which was the dart of Diana the goddesse) with this inscription, *Consequitur quodcumque petit.* That is, she obtaineth whatsoeuer she wisheth for or desireth.

Solatur

Rules to make your own

according to Paolo Giovio 1559 *Dialogo dell'Imprese*

There should be a proper proportion between soul and body [motto and picture].

The impresa should be neither so obscure that the Sibyl must interpret it, nor so obvious that every plebeian can understand it.

It should have a beautiful appearance, making use of stars, the sun, the moon, fire, water, green trees, mechanical instruments, strange animals, and fantastic birds.

It should contain no human form.

It should have a motto, which is the soul of the body, and should be expressed in a language other than the native language of the bearer, so that the meaning may be more obscure.

The motto should be brief, but not so much that it creates uncertainty. Two or three words may be enough, unless they are in the form of verse.

Other ways to get an impresa

- Borrow someone else's you like
- Select one from a list or emblem book
- Hire a poet/artist to make you one
- Chose a motto from antiquity

References and further reading

Alan Young *The English Tournament Impresa*

Alciato's Emblems in Latin and English <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/>

Ursula George's article "The Renaissance Impresa"

Michael Bath *Emblems for a Queen*

Claude Paradin *Devises Heroique*

http://iris.lib.virginia.edu/speccol/gordon/gordonimages/Gordon1551_P37/index.html

The English Emblem Book Project (9 different period emblem books)

<http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/home.htm>



FLORA
Floury Francis Begins Paris
and Flies exactly down
With their own Colors
Lately discovered
Engraved and Sold by Peter James at the
The King's



