

Australia's new flag - a pageant of colours and integrated symbols

A.C. Burton

ABSTRACT: The history and significance of colour themes in Australian vexillography are explored to provide a reference point for evolving and depicting old symbols in a new way, to weave from an ancient Dreaming new myths for a nation's healing. As with South Africa's flag, an appropriate flag for Australia may evolve from a reinterpretation of colours. A new flag will attract the commitment of Australians, and inspire their future efforts, in the measure that it honours and respect the realities of Australia's history. Colours and traditions might combine to speak effectively of Australia as a nation aspiring to a cosmopolitan lifestyle, its people assured and reconciled in a shared sense of place - offering the world an example of confident citizenship rather than contentious nationalism.

The illustrations for this paper appear on Plates 34-35.

1 Integration of symbols - a question of integrity

This paper is about an Australian flag to come. A first point of reference in searching for a suitable symbol is to understand, and to overcome, Australia's denial of its past. Without such understanding, flag design is an idle pastime. Now, at the edge of a new millennium, we have to acknowledge that settlement spread with some measure of cultural arrogance.¹ The view officially taught, at least in Australia, for a long time, was that an old land new found by Europeans didn't belong to anyone who mattered. The doctrine in Australia of *Terra*

nullius - land belonging to none - is now discredited.²

Australia's present makes sense only from its past. The seeds of its future and its future flag are already there. Integration of symbols requires the integrity of candour. The elemental idea of this paper is that integration of peoples and symbols comes from integrity of mind. Integrity will not ignore atrocities. Nor will it cultivate political correctness of one kind or another. Civic harmony grows from mutual respect for different traditions and from shared experience. What many in Australia still recognise as mateship.

The second point of reference in this paper is the symbolic power of colour. Colour crosses many margins and several meanings. Applied to people who stand behind flags and symbols, colour is an atavistic and sensitive issue in any country. Colour, and the differences of which the rainbow is an ancient symbol,³ is a subtle issue for Australia, which seeks a harmony of cultures.

Despite the goodwill and the good works of the last 200 years that out-measure malice, Australia is still a whole continent where a nation-state - but not quite a state of nation - has been built upon the dispossession of peoples. Sovereign in custom, language, ritual, religion, in seals and symbols, and above all in deep relationship to the land, Australia's Aboriginal people are still strangers to most of their fellow Australians. Many, from the national leadership down, ignore that past injustices, unresolved, threaten the stability and identity of Australia.

Many Australians do not share the meanness of spirit that has made Aboriginal people the first of many scapegoats. In that context, colour is a symbol of optimism. The Rainbow also reminds us harmony and reconciliation after the storm.⁴

Applied to flags, the two themes explored in this paper - of historical integrity and of integrated symbols, including colour - are threads of a seamless weave. The one informs the other. The flag is the chief symbol of a nation. It proclaims and emanates power. That power is more splendidly seen the more it reflects, in the lines and symmetry of its design, the spiritual authority of enduring tradition and allegiance given freely. South Africa's flag, at least, is powerful. With understated simplicity, its array of colours shows that it stands for all. Others will speak for South Africa and its flag, but such an example inspires my vision of another flag in the South, jaunty and gay,⁵ that will sing to the world of Australia as a united and good land, a place in the sun for those who respect it and work for it.

When this Congress meets again in 1999, the process will be under way in Australia to devise a new flag to greet a new century of Federation on 1 January 2001 - if not for the Olympic Games in Sydney, September, 2000. In finding our flag, we shall look to the future, but draw from a valuable past. And the array of colours in the flags of our history already provide important clues for Australia's new flag.

2 Blue, white and red

The 'red, white and blue' (as it is usually put) of Australia's national Flag have strong associations with Britain. The same colours are popular in alternative designs.⁶ In many ways, Australia will always aspire to be that 'new Britannia,' powerful and prosperous, confident and calm, that the pioneer of Australian representative government, William Charles Wentworth, wished in 1838.⁷ History, and Australia's colonial experience, cannot be unwritten.

For a nation of many cultures merging, red and white and blue and white are colours of an earlier merger of Kingdoms and peoples, of England and Scotland. Nearly 400 years ago, their national flags fused to form the flag of the Empire which made the mould for modern Australia. As a settlement founded from over the sea, it is natural that these are also the colours of the British navy with ensigns blue, red and white. As Ralph Kelly [16] and others have shown, these ensigns are the foundation of Australia's flags.

As I am not British, I see these colours in a new way. The design depicted in Fig. 1 goes back to July 1984, when on posting to Bourke and the outback beyond I saw the immensity of Australia's red earth, the indigo of its star-struck heaven above the brilliance of a new dawn. But that is only a starting point in re-assessing the colours of an Australian flag. There is nothing essentially British about them. There is a fresh, crisp design quality, and heraldic clarity, in the contrast of warm and cool colours, the symbols of struggle and serenity. More than that, blue and white is a frequent theme in many of Australia's flags. After all, our land is set by sea. Red ochre heralds its own indigenous, Aboriginal, perspective. A pattern of blue white and red is not to be dismissed lightly.

3 Blue and white

Blue and white have some official sanction. They were the heraldic colours of the wreath (or torse) in the Arms of the Commonwealth proclaimed in 1901. Granted by Edward VII on 7 May 1908 (Fig. 2), these Arms contained a white shield bordered blue, charged with a red cross, with edges white and blue and white stars. This device was replaced in 1912 by the current Arms (Fig. 3) with symbols of the six States more evident, the wreath changed to blue and gold.

The reasons for blue and white in these first Arms can only be surmised, but there are suggestive indicators. The flag of the Federation Movement (Fig. 4) was predominantly blue and white, and was still popular as late as 1915.⁸ The official flag of the Commonwealth, chosen in 1901 (Fig. 5), was also blue and white - a British blue ensign in fact (the Flags Act 1953 described it so until 1981). This flag was 'defaced,' to use the heraldic term, with the Federal star pointing to the centre of the Union Jack, and at the free end, by the badge of

the Southern Cross. The stars were white, each pointed differently.

The blue ensign of the British navy, bearing five white stars of the Southern Cross (pointed differently to indicate the relative brilliance of each star), had also been the official emblem of the colony of Victoria from 1870 (Fig. 6).⁹ Surmounted later by a Crown, it remains the emblem and flag of the State of Victoria. Unremarkably, two of the five winning entries for the new Commonwealth flag were from Melbourne.

Victoria also gave Australia its most famous blue and white banner - the star-crossed flag of the Eureka Stockade (Fig. 7), first raised in November 1854.¹⁰ Its five white stars are arranged upon a white cross. A design curiosity and, strangely, strongly emotive for Australians, it is the reverse, almost, of the equally unofficial but widely used shipping flags of New South Wales. In these (Figs 8-9) the blue and white theme appears again - but as a British white ensign decorated with blue crosses, strung with white stars.

The mid-1800s was a time for new flags.¹¹ Earlier than Eureka was the star-studded ensign of the Anti-Transportation League of 1851 (Fig. 10). The stars were gold, but the field was still blue, another reference to the likely British naval origin. Of similar vintage (1849) was Dunmore Lang's suggestion for a flag of an Australian federal republic (Fig. 11) - blue again - with a circlet of white stars and a white kangaroo.¹²

The earliest documented reference to blue and white as Australian colours is found in the blue cross version of the New South Wales (white) Ensign, one of the shipping flags mentioned above.¹³ This was apparently a variation of a flag claimed to have been designed by John Nicholson and John Bingle, at Sydney, in "1823 or 1824." [1]

The very similar emblem or badge of the Colony of New South Wales, with red cross and gold stars was not formally adopted until 1876, but Bingle appears to claim ultimate authorship of the same concept. [1] Whatever substance there might be to recollections written after 60 years, a blue and white precedent for the badge appears in the New South Wales Post Office flagcharts from 1832. An arrangement of stars, white on a blue or red cross, or arranged cross-wise on a blue field, is found in various unofficial arms and seals in the Colony from the 1830s. The Church of England in Australia still uses such a device (Fig. 12).

From the 1850s, other variations of the New South Wales maritime flags appeared on paddlesteamers trading down the Darling and other inland rivers of eastern Australia. The Murray River Flags, as they are known (Figs 13-14), were embellished with the Union Jack and red crosses. Loyal flags, yet local flags, these too were mainly blue and white.

4 Blue and gold

As previously mentioned, the colours of the wreath changed to (Royal) blue and gold in the Arms of Australia, granted in 1912. The first flag (Fig. 15) for the

1988 Bicentennial was rendered in these colours.

Why the colours were changed in 1912 awaits more research. One may speculate that the change was inspired by the fabulous gold strikes in eastern Australia in the 1850s; the 1890s saw similar finds in the west. Perhaps, like the sun symbol then popular, gold was an apt symbol for prosperity and optimism. A golden sunrise was one of many symbols of Federation and a new century. A circular sun is the backdrop to the 1904 Arms of South Australia [2] and survives in the Commonwealth Arms as the Federation star. It features in the insignia of the Australian Army and in architecture of that era. The golden national flower strewn about the Arms provides a neat heraldic balance.

5 Green and gold

Much is made in Australia of green and 'gold' - and the 'golden' Wattle (Fig. 16), with sporting teams kitted out accordingly since the late 1880s. Green and gold have some resonance in Australian heraldry; they seem embedded in the Australian mind as 'our colours.' How much this sentiment has been engineered is hard to say. Familiarity is easily manufactured. In 1984 the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, decided that green and gold were to be Australia's colours, gazetted (on 19 April) cryptically as follows:

the green and gold (PMS 116C and 348C) ... shall be the national colours of Australia for use on all occasions on which such colours are customarily used ¹⁴

Was there much thought, or was it simply the case of a populist leader seizing an opportunity to bolster that standing? Six months before, Hawke had sought to personify the glow of the Americas Cup victory. The Australian winner had flaunted a green and yellow emblem - a boxing kangaroo (Fig. 17). Despite the Gazettal of green and gold, the Colours of the Commonwealth of Australia remain blue and gold. The national Arms have not been changed.

Whatever prompted the Prime Minister, behind the scenes was long familiarity and intense lobbying. Green and gold were worn by the Australian team at the Olympic Games in 1920 and further promoted at the 1956 Melbourne Games, and in other sports events since. Prominent in the lobbies was Ausflag. Its three goals for national identity were to adopt 'Our own Anthem, Our own Colours, Our own Flag.'¹⁵ Founded in 1983, Ausflag has taken credit for the adoption of Advance Australia Fair as the national anthem and of green and gold as national colours. But the process had begun in 1977.

The case for green and gold either as, or on, Australia's flag is far from settled. Many Australians - and not only conservatives - contest the need for contrived patriotism. Cynically, they point to the vested interests of textile merchants. These critics might also recognise that an evolving national sentiment

had provided in 1901, and well before that, a wide range of national symbols, of flora, fauna and conventional heraldry. [19]

There is some difficulty with green and gold (actually, green and yellow) for an Australian flag. Libya has a green flag, and so does Islam. A yellow flag is a symbol of sickness. It once asserted Imperial China. The effect can often be insipid, or heavy, depending on the shade. A number of proposed alternative flag designs succeed in this (Figs 18-21).

Favour shown to green and gold seems to relate best to the floral emblem. Early in the century, when after Federation a sense of nationhood was new, Wattle Day on 1 August was popular, with sprigs of the flower sold as expression of patriotic sentiment. Patriotic fervor of the day is reflected in poetry of a certain kind - thus, Veronica Mason (1911):

The bush was grey a week today
(olive-green and brown and grey)
but now the Spring has come this way
with blossom for the wattle [21]

The colours of the national flower are reflected in another Australian tradition. The Green and Gold Cookery Book, published in 1923, was found in every house.

6 Blue, green and gold

In recent years, the National Australia Day Council has encouraged celebration of 26 January as a National Day, rather more than the foundation of a prison colony at Sydney in 1788. As part of its merchandising, the Council combines - and compromises between - the blue and gold of the Commonwealth Arms and Australia's 'official' green and gold. This very Australian practice of having a bet each way is reflected also in the livery of Australian Airlines (Fig. 22) before merging with Qantas - both using a kangaroo.

A 1989 Congress paper at Melbourne suggested that use of blue or red versions of the Australian flag from 1901 to 1953 had contributed to unhealthy perspectives on national identity, a point elaborated more roundly by Kelly. [8,18] Confusion between green and gold and blue and gold as Australia's national colours is hardly less schizoid.

Australia's future flag might simply carry some botanical touch, alluding to the national flower. Design suggestions have not been reluctant in this, although the effect is frequently banal. Floral flags are few - the Northern Marianas, Hong Kong, and the seldom seen yellow and green emblem of Macau. The symmetry of such devices is, of course, another thing.

7 Black, red and yellow

Aside from the heraldry inherited from a colonial era are the natural colours of the land, and of its indigenous peoples. A new flag conceived by artist and Aboriginal, Harold Thomas, was raised in Adelaide on 9 July 1971. Its clash of colours and stark simplicity (Fig. 23) shatter complacency. In the generation since, Aboriginal leaders and Governments have struggled to realise the hopes of the 1967 Referendum when 92% of Australians first recognised Aboriginal people as citizens of Australia. The Aboriginal flag came out of that process. It has proven effective in focusing issues of Aboriginal land title and social justice at home and, increasingly, abroad. The Aboriginal flag is recognised as a symbol of survival and resistance of a minority against the odds, and is respected for that by many non-Aboriginal Australians. Some, meaning well, have proposed its inclusion in a new Australian flag.¹⁶

Thomas' claim to authorship has been contested, but no challenger has explained, as he has, the symbolic link between Land, Life and People in its colours¹⁷ black, red and yellow ("not gold!" - the designer insists). On 9 April 1997, Thomas' authorship was acknowledged in the Federal Court, his ownership of concept vindicated. In many discussions I've had with him, Harold Thomas has been at pains to emphasize that the Aboriginal flag is an exclusive artefact, designed specifically for the Aboriginal people. Replacing the Union Jack with his flag derogates from its design and intent, and its power as an effective icon.

8 Black, green, blue and white

Partly in response to the success of the Aboriginal flag, on 29 May 1992 the very different people of the Torres Strait Islands at Australia's northern gateway adopted their own flag. Its arrival seemed to suit the season. It reflects the Islanders' tenacity that led to the High Court Mabo decision of 3 June 1992, overturning the doctrine that no one had owned Australia. The flag was promoted through the UN Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples in 1993.

Blue, green and black, with a device in white (Fig. 24), this flag appears to flout heraldic conventions in a combination not seen since a Zanzibari flag of 1964. Its colours and devices do bring together ideas of ethnicity, five island groups set in a tropical sea with common religious and cultural traditions. With the Aboriginal flag, that of the Torres Strait Islanders was gazetted on 14 July 1995 under the Flags Act as an official flag of Australia, subordinate to the National Flag. The two flags are often displayed together.

9 Integrated symbols

The colours of the indigenous flags combined include those of the national flag. There are avenues here for seeking reconciliation - or as I prefer to put it,

integration - of symbols. Most indigenous people would agree that any revision of national symbols, including the flag, is less important than a formal Citizens' Compact, or Treaty, first, on sharing the country. Nothing less will do if Australians are to be as 'relaxed' as the present Prime Minister promises.

Unexpectedly, the Aboriginal flag with its symbol of the Sun, is finding new status as an emblem of and focus for social debate. The rising sun was a popular emblem for Federation found at the edge of the last century of this millennium. On a new flag, at the edge of the new Millennium, another sun might shine as a symbol of rancour resolved.

Detail aside, what flag could gracefully replace our present flag? Flags are but cloaks of many colours but they contain powerful myth and mystery within their veils, and express the meaning of mysteries in their unfurling. South Africa's flag is a Rainbow Dreaming cloak of this kind. The many colours of the Australian continent, land of the Rainbow Serpent, also convey mysteries which its flag, finally, may reveal. That flag should show an understanding of what Australia is about. On the surface it is a land of great beauty; at a deeper level there is the story of its long possession and further settlement.

An authentic Australian flag need not be Aboriginal in style or colour. The Aboriginal flag remains distinct. Neither the flag nor the people it represents can be shut away in a corner. In the context of two cultures as yet unreconciled, the flag issue is full of irony. In 1788, settlers seized Australia with a powerful flag - for England and St George, and for George their German King, the rightful owners flagless. Two centuries later, Aboriginal peoples survive, their powerful flag the proof, while between two flags, in a confusion of conflicting crosses, settlers' sons, old and new, orphans of Empire and foreign feuds, seem bereft and bare on Bondi beach. 'Indigenality' - not 'Aboriginality' - is the question posed by our vast country and behind any authentic flag it flies.¹⁸ Australia's multicultural experiment is old enough, after 210 years, to come to maturity and reflect that coming of age in new symbols.

There are many ways to explore our traditions. We can draw from our cultural treasury things both old and new. The silver stars and indigo sky that preside over the Australian bush shine on in the blue and white heraldry of the settler traditions I have traced. Standing out is the cluster that seems a Cross to some, and to Dante, symbols of virtue. [4] These same stars shine through the songlines of the original Australians, peoples of the red ochre. Stepping stones set in the Milky Way, they provide, perhaps, a bridge of symbols, whereby visions and values of ancient and modern Australians cross over and combine. [4]

Our future as Australians is to share the land and sense of the sacred remarkable among the First Australians. Across the land and at its core, are reminders of their presence, their survival, their antiquity, their traditions and their colours. The red desert is the hearth of our homeland. Its red and tawny ochres flame as brightly as the four heavenly fires that Dante saw.¹⁹ And in the heart of that desert is another symbol, a large red rock that we call *Uluru*, which conveys that the only continent that is one country is also our one and total

sacred site. The immense mass of Uluru might be a totem of all our national Dreaming. It recalls ancestral deeds, remembered in myth or recorded in words, whispering heroic sagas inspiring the Great Trek of a people reconciled as one nation.

Upon the walls of this monument, as the *Anangu*, the traditional Elders show us, are the marks of titanic struggles of mythical but also mystical serpents. Let these be a symbolic reminder of struggles yet to come as a nation comes of age, a reminder that nations are formed from a long line of blood and song. Alone under the cobalt vault, this flaming monolith is a silent sentinel, a keeper at the Gate, a reminder that the *Wandjina* are watching over the destiny of this land and its people, the Land of the Fair Go, offering a place in the sun for all.

10 A final vision

And now, let me try to convey a vision of Australia's flag unfurled. For those who would dream dreams, and find meaning in the Australian Dreaming, and with a view to all our history and traditions, the flag that many seek for Australia contains and reveals the meaning of our country in its folds. In the play of its patterns, the brilliance of its colours, it shines like another Kavani Star.²⁰ It is a flag bewitching in a way that Cumberland, Swinburne and others of the Empire could not bring themselves to imagine.²¹ It is a flag of dignity and dance.

Some clever combination of the blue and the white, the red and the gold, of the gold and the green, of the green and the blue of current and respected Australian flags and symbols evokes a jaunty play of elements - of sunshine, sea and sand, of primeval ochres, of the brooding interior of the largest island and smallest continent. It stands for all who call Australia home.

Scattered with stars, an Australian flag sequined so suggests the presence of the Dreamtime amid the mundane. It is an icon of images flickering from the recesses of the past. It evokes not just a new Britannia, but that Republic that prompted Plato. It shows the link between earth and a Celestial City, humanity and ideas beyond. It is splendid with light and understanding that the Land, which is but a piece of a part, is sacred and central as a gift for us to nurture.

Notes

1. Cultural arrogance based on assumptions of enlightenment. *Apartheid*, foreshadowed by Cecil Rhodes in the 1880s, and institutionalised in South Africa from the 1920s, ended in 1994. Australia's Aboriginal peoples were recognised as citizens in 1967.
2. The doctrine of *terra nullius* was used - with few exceptions and scruples - to justify dispossession of Aboriginal peoples from ancestral lands. *Terra nullius* was overturned by Australia's High Court in June 1992.

- 3: Genesis 9, 12-17 is the *locus classicus* for this concept and symbolism. The import of Noah's Ark is not that humanity and the whole zoo was saved from extinction by flood but that the future of the planet was to be built on the idea of a place for all life forms.
4. Genesis 9, 12-17 again.
5. In Horne's [15] *Ideas for a Nation*, p. 17, referring to the popular local flag of that time, on the occasion of the Sydney Harbour regatta of 1838. A new flag might show similar insouciance, dash and verve.
6. See Kelly [16] and Kelly's paper in these proceedings on the subject of Australian flag design competitions.
7. William Charles Wentworth is considered one of the Fathers of self-government in the Australian colonies. He is also credited with the lines expressing the hope that should the Empire falter, it would allow

Australasia (to) float with flag unfurled,
a new Britannia in another world. [13]
8. Burton [3], p. 178-179.
9. Kelly [16], p. 187-188.
10. For an extended discussion on the significance of the Eureka Flag, see Young [28] and Fox [11].
11. This may have been no accident. From the American and French Revolution on, through the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, and particularly in 1848, political consciousness had been rising among the peoples of Europe, and wherever their culture was transplanted, from the Andes to the Vaal.
12. See Grassby [12], who appears to be citing Dunmore Lang's manifesto, *Freedom and Independence for the Golden Lands of Australia*, written in 1851. The kangaroo is today curiously unpopular as flag device, despite its place as the dexter supporter of the Arms and the distinctive emblem of the national carrier, Qantas.
13. The New South Wales Calendar and General Post Office Directory 1832. For further reference to maritime use - see Hastings Shire annotation on pg 182 in Burton [3].
14. Commonwealth of Australia Gazette No. S-142 of 19 April 1984. Australia's green and gold are respectively PMS 348C and 116C, although the gazette reverses the order!
15. Ausflag was established in 1983 as a non-profit, private company with a charter to promote the adoption of appropriate Australian symbols, and chief among these, a new flag.

16. See for example discussion with Pat O'Shane in "Luck and the Flag" in *Cruz Australis*, Vol. 8/3, No. 35, July-September 1992, p. 133.
17. For a detailed treatment of the origins and intent of the Aboriginal flag see Burton [5].
18. A comment on this word indigenality - which I confess to coining. It means more than Aboriginality. It certainly does not mean blackness. It refers, for any country, to those native born, black or white, but more than that, it applies to those who are committed to sharing and caring for the land that nurtures them and others. And for Australia, and for those but lately arrived, a claim to indigenality is contingent upon willingness to leave behind on an alien shore all political and other prejudices based on assumptions of cultural superiority. It implies commitment to a new sense of homeland and nationhood.
19. Burton and Devitt [4], p. 92, citing Musa's [22] translation of *Divine Comedy* p. 2-3 and commentary p. 8-9. Fiamelle could also mean 'lustre' or 'brilliance.'
20. The Kavani Star was the pre-Islamic emblem of Iran [25].
21. Barlow Cumberland, an apologist for the British Empire and its symbols, especially the Union Jack, was later misquoted (without attribution) Swinburne [26]. Her misquotation found its way into the Parliamentary Debate on the Australian flag in April 1992. The full and proper [con]text is:

...the red ensign with its Union Jack, which is the embodiment of the power and glory of the British nation ... the red ensign of the homeland, with the sign of the colony added to its folds in these far-off lands, signals to the beholder that it is an imperial Union Ensign of the British Empire.

The original text is found in Cumberland [7]. See also Kelly [18].

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Tony Burton's interest in flags dates from around 1957. From Australia's remote-area radio School of the Air he learnt about the independence of Ghana and its new flag combining the Garvey and Rastafarian colours of an African identity.

An officer of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Tony has an affinity for indigenous perspectives of Australian identity. As a flag designer, he has been successful in a number of the recent design competitions in Australia. He is also the designer of the logo and flag of the Flag Society of Australia, and of the flag of the 13th International Congress of Vexillology, where he presented a paper and workshop on the principles of flag design. His blue and white-panelled flag featuring the Southern Cross, designed in 1989, has been used by Ausflag as the source of a number of its experimental flags displayed in Sydney.

Tony Burton joined the Flag Society of Australia in 1987 and has been Editor of its journal, *Cruz Australis*, since 1990. He has provided vexillological research to the Society and advice to Ausflag as well as contributing to the most recent edition of the Australian Government's book of flag protocol, *Australian Flags*.

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Plate 34



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

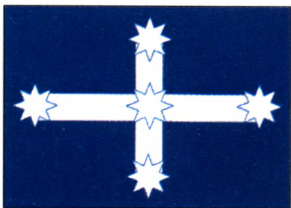


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

Plate 35



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24