

Points of view, in search of visual quality

by Theun Okkerse

Abstract What is a flag, what is important about a flag, what requirements can you set for a flag design and what is the anatomy of a flag?

These questions may seem obvious and the answers are known. What is put forward in this paper may give new perspective on what is already known. This insights may be used to develop vexillology further.



Delacroix, 'Freedom is leading on', 1830, Louvre, Paris. (The top picture is photo-shopped)



When looking at flags and philosophising about them, three things spring to mind:

- the difference between the design (the actual drawing) and the actual flying of the flag can be significant.
- Looking at a flag design on paper and the flag actually being battered by the wind seem to be two different worlds.
- The realisation that a flag may become 'unreadable' because of how the wind is blowing. And that the wind is in the directors seat conducting the flag is enough reason to take this seriously and makes one think.

In art history there are some fine examples to be found where flags feature on the main stage. Delacroix's 'Freedom is leading on' from 1830 is a particular fine example. The flag is effectively used to dramatise the scene (set in a time when this flag probably did not exist) of the revolution in Paris. To illustrate how important this element is in the painting, a photo-shopped version is shown where the flag has been taken out.

Van der Velde the Younger masterly painting 'Het IJ voor Amsterdam' is also a fine example: the billowing of sails and the frantic flapping of the flags. Flags are not only signs of identification, but are effective dramatic additions to the scene as well.



Willem van de Velde de jonge 1686, 'Het IJ voor Amsterdam', Coll. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

At the Rotterdam Flag Parade on the bank of the River Maas, a wide variety of flags can be enjoyed in their natural element. In 'real live', flags are in the best possible situation to study them: flags actually being hoisted in a flagpole. The design quality of the flags in the Parade are generally speaking excellent. It concerns of course national flags on display there: these have simple designs and will perform well.

A photographer may be jealous of painters like Delacroix and Van der Velde not to have to wait for the decisive moment for a flag to be in the right position to be photographed.

Unlike a painter, a photographer must be master of the waiting game, waiting for that one moment. (once, I took about thirty shots of a flag for a magazine cover before I was satisfied.)



Bob van Reeth, *Huis van Roosmalen*, Antwerp, Belgium

Flags are like reluctant actors out of control, assuming a complex of movements: from wild to elegant, from stately controlled to passive, sometimes with a small rebound. It is extremely difficult to make a good picture with the same level of drama as on a painting that captures the essence of the design.

But if we are just looking at a waving flag, and forming an impression of the design in our minds, it will consist of many frames. Together they shape the flag. It is the repetition of movement, the same and yet different, that makes flags such fascinating objects to study.

The wind moves the flag. Therefore figures on it should be tolerant of movement. A flag design must be clear at all time. The House of Roosmalen of architect Bob van Reeth in Antwerp, Belgium, flies a flag that comes close to the ideal for a flag. Having the same black and white stripes as the building, it adds to its host the dimension of movement. A perfect message to the passers-by of a self-conscious presentation.

Of course this is a flag design for no more than a house. It catches the essence of a fine flag design. It is all about movement and direction. A ballet with the wind. Equality of both sides of a flag seems logical. The wind may blow a flag in any direction. So it may fly from right to left, against our reading direction. One may argue that the flag is not presented the right way, that it should be mirrored.



Carlifonia State flag

But the flag of the American state of California for example has lettering on it. A historically given fact but questionable from a vexillographical point of view. It means that this flag only functions fully on only one of the two sides. The wind always dictates the reading direction. (The state of California may decide that it has grown up and should get rid of the lettering; and by doing so add a fine flag to the US state flag collection.) So, a designer has to take all these matters into consideration when creating a new flag design. The same can be said for the commissioner who wants to judge the proposal. A commissioner may fail to recognise a bad design and may end up with a terrible product. 'The simpler the better' should be the motto.



Carlifonia State flag 'matured'

It is very important that both parties make sure that they understand what the rules are. Having been presented with only a flag that has the flagpole on the left is not an option. A design should also be presented flying from right to left, with the flagpole on the right.

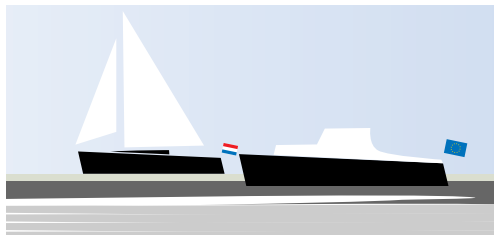
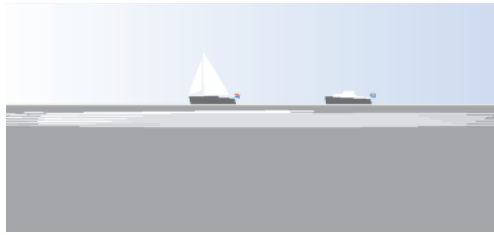
Remember, the reverse is not a second rate side, but an integral part of the flag and just as important. For example: if a French flag is viewed flying from right to left so the colours are shown in the sequence red, white and blue when read from left to right, that does not change the fact that the flag is still blue, white and red, in that order!



Flag of Dutch municipality of Zaltbommel

There is something else that may make it impossible to design a proper flag: the overburdening of it. Not being able to generalise and discriminate can best be illustrated with the recently designed flag for the municipality of Zaltbommel in the Netherlands.

This town has been merged with the surrounding villages in a reshuffle on a regional level. It is full of scattered figures: a sword, a rose and two towers. Typically the result of 'wanting to please everyone', an overloaded flag is created. Especially the towers in the top and bottom fly are redundant. The result is a most irritating flag design. Simplicity must be the goal of proper flag design.



Next I like to show you more examples that deal with – what I think – are important points for judging flags. Naturally I am overstating situations in which I view flags. Contrast makes shapes clearer and defines boundaries better.

The Flag Test / VlaggenTest (2005)

Years ago I was on a sailing trip in the Dutch province of Zeeland when I saw in the distance two boats: a sailing yacht and a motorboat. On the yacht a Dutch flag flew, red-white-blue, and on the motorboat a dark, un-definable one. It was only later, when all ships had gathered by a lock, that I found it to be the European flag.

Something clearly was not right with the design of the European flag. The question that arose was: may a flag be such a bad performer that it is nearly impossible to recognize it from a distance?

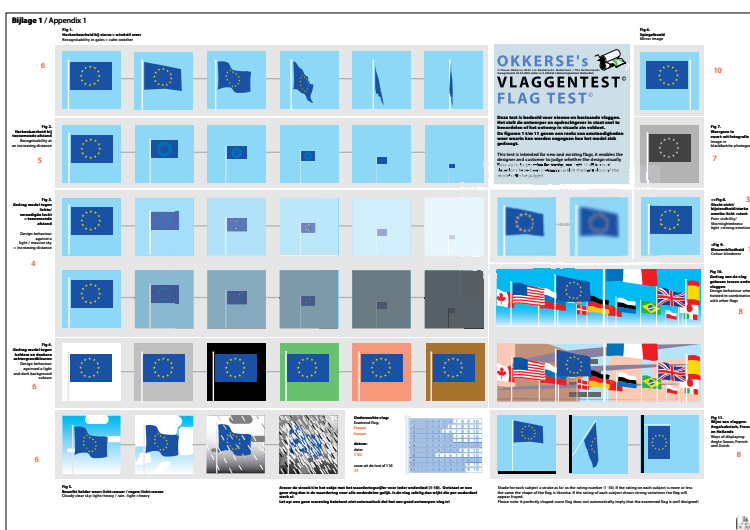
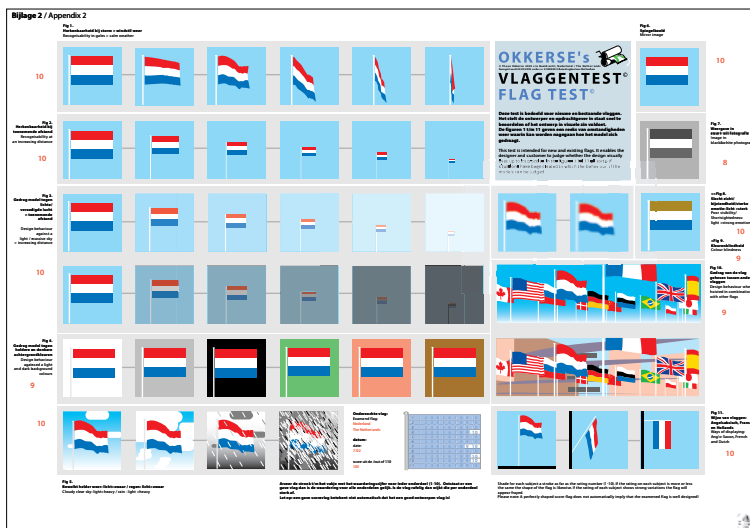
It was there that I came up with the idea to create a test that would help to judge the visual quality of a flag.

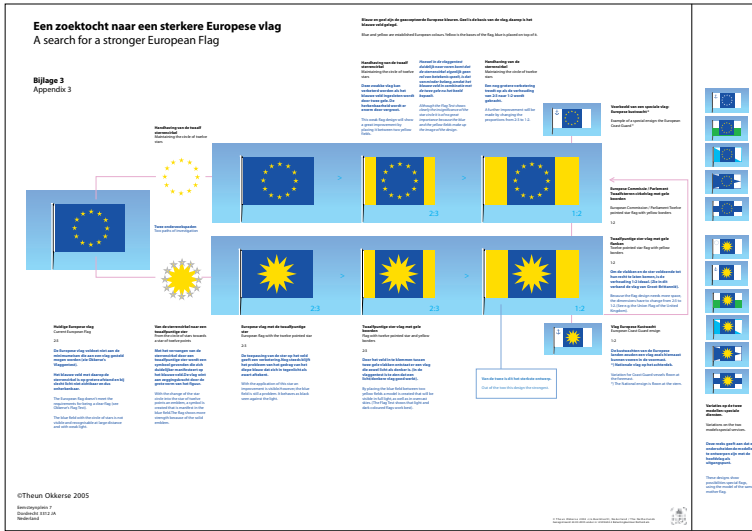
Simply by comparison. I went to work to identify criteria which – I thought – a well designed flag should meet.

These are:

- visibility from a great distance (at sea for instance, a very important field of inquiry);
- in all sorts of weather conditions (good or poor visibility);
- with the available light (just out of curiosity, although it may be a realistic situation, foggy weather conditions for instance);
- against backgrounds (built-up areas, hills etc.);
- colour blindness (lots of people suffer from it in various degrees);
- poor eyesight (a blurred view);
- black and white photographs (the whole Second World War is remembered by black and white photographs);
- distinctiveness (if all flags look alike than there is no point in creating a new one);
- can the flag stand up to other flags? (at the European Parliament or the United Nations, in between the flags the member states)
- does the flag maintain it's quality when viewed flying from right to left? (later I did find that this was one of the most important questions)

For reference I chose the Dutch flag because of it's proven quality (that was distinctly recognizable at the same distance, as the European one was not).



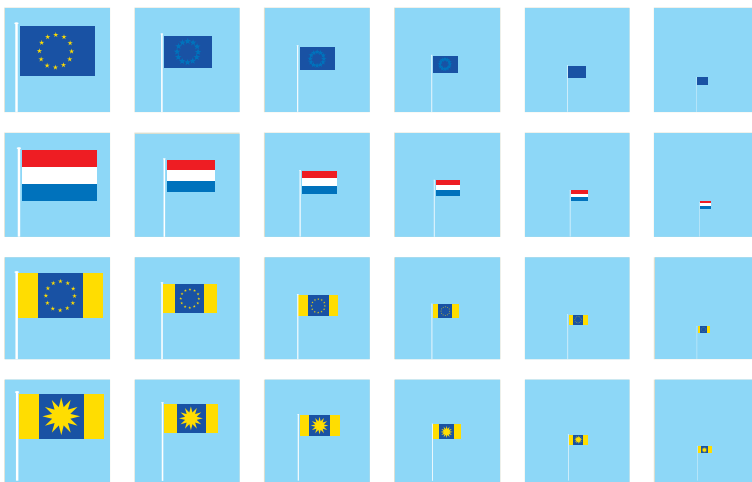


Flag Test first version

On the Flag Test sheets you can see for yourself what the strengths and weaknesses of the European flag are. (For fun I added a scoring board that would shape like a flag. With a bad score it looked torn.) Not surprisingly the European flag came out battered. As you can see for yourself it scores disappointingly in lots of fields.

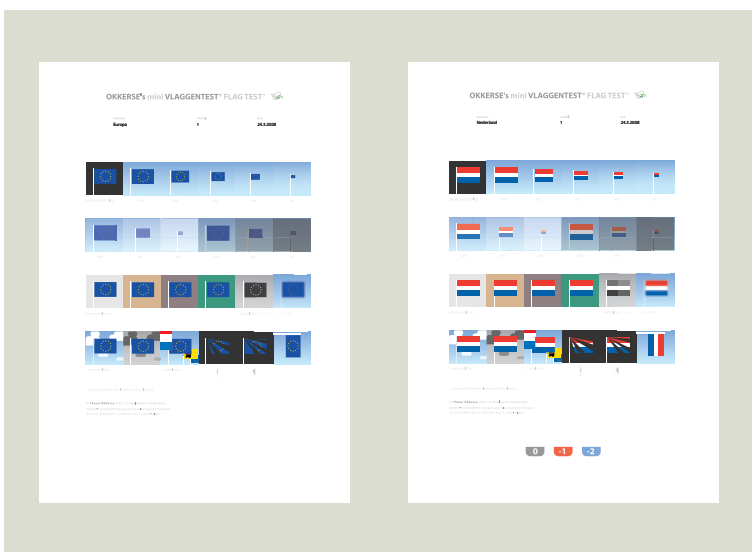
Did I design this Test for fellow designers? No, I did not, designers know very well how to go about. I did design it for lea man, read: European politicians. As I did mention before, the quality of a design is guaranteed by able commissioners and not just by designers.

In the case of Europe it is not really fair. The circle of stars was parachuted on a blue field by chance. A design for a letterhead and not for a flag.



I did formulate some criteria such as the need for contrast within a flag, boldness of figures etc. The result was sent to the European Commission and an e-mail came in reply stating that there was nothing wrong with the flag.

It was clear that I did fail in my mission and sadly Europe will forever have an under-performing flag!



MiniTest (second version)

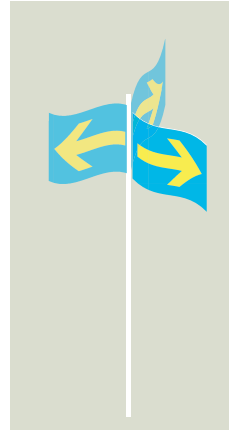
Later I designed a simplified version of the test. With a more or less 'drop-in' of a flag and easier to handle. It resulted in an audit that was just as good as the original.

The strength of the Test is in the comparison of a given flag with the reference flag. It provides laymen with insight into the visual qualities of flags.



Reading direction

It is of paramount importance to realise that the reading direction of a flag may be as essential as the design itself. It is the wind that determines the way a flag presents itself. So it may be flying from right to the left, or in any direction it chooses.



Both sides of a flag are equal
Wind determines the reading direction



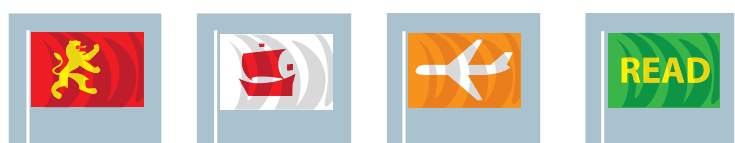
The flags shown here cause no problems when being presented flying from right to the left. The Dutch flag or the Danish flag do not change significantly, but the French flag does; the colour sequence changes places. But nobody would be arguing that this is the case! The reason is simple: the wind determines the way we read the flag.

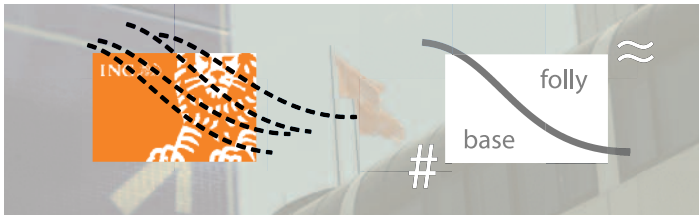


It is only the last picture that causes a problem. Here, because of the mirrored text, it is unreadable! The upper line-up is fine. It hopefully proves that lettering in general is a bad idea to put on a flag.

If we look at the lower four flags we see that turning the figures may change the content as it was intended. The lion turns out to be scared, running away from the wind instead of putting on a fight.

But that may be different for the sailing ship and the aeroplane. The way they are placed is less critical; having an easy or tough journey seems to be a matter of taste.





The discovery of the 'base triangle' in a flag

In my hometown (Dordrecht) there is a bank building on which two company flags are flown. It was on a day with little wind that I noticed that the weather condition was not favourable for these orange flags with white figures. I could distinguish the colour orange, but not the figure on it. Of course I knew what was on it, it is a well known bank, but it showed how textile can be manipulated by the wind.

Complex designs – like this example – are easily abused by movement when the flag design makes no sense whatsoever.

Let me remark that days with moderate wind are quite common, the rule rather than the exception. So identifying the weaknesses of a flag in unfavourable circumstances is self-evident. It provides us with tools to predict if a design may be successful or not.

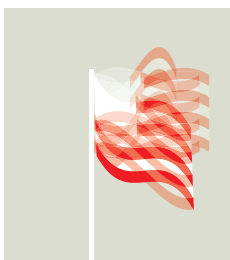
On the figure you see flags that are being partly covered. The part of a flag that almost always can be viewed undisturbedly is visible.

The essence of a flag lies for a great deal in this area. Here the flag design must give a definition for the rest, a clue to the disturbed other part.

As you can see, the flags with simple designs deal with movement easily. In the case of striped flags, how the rest is filled in is easy to predict. Crosses behave in the same way. But wrongly placed figures like the lion on the flag of the Belgian province of Oost-Vlaanderen stick out. The flag of the Dutch municipality of Zaltbommel has troubles too.

It can be fixed by moving the figures away from their original spots, towards the hoist.

Historically lions on flags in the Netherlands were placed near the hoist, on 1/3 of the length of the flag. For a good reason, as it turns out. In Belgium figures are traditionally placed in the centre.



complexity through movement



Flag of The Netherlands, Ireland, Scotland, The United States and Flag of the Staten-Generaal (NL, historic) for example are sound in their design. Even with the fly top following these flags stay clear in their design intention.

Flag of the Flemish province of Oost-Vlaanderen (East-Flanders)

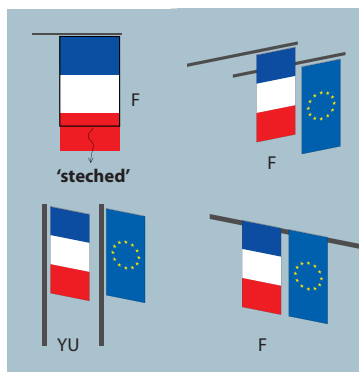
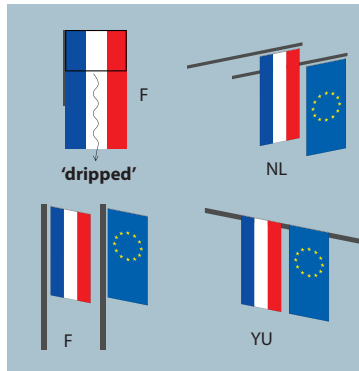


Flag of the Dutch municipality Zaltbommel





Official portrait of President Hollande with in the background the questioned flag



^ The hoist of a French flag never starts with three colours but with just one. The eaves gutter in the photograph functions as hoist. The flag should have been positioned differently



President Hollande with in the background a corrected flag

Overtuned confusion

Jean-Paul Garraud, a right wing French member of parliament, suggested that the banner on the official photograph of socialist president Hollande was not the French but the Dutch flag.

Was it a political point he was trying to score, or did he have a point? It is likely that Hollande's particular name inspired Garraud in asking this question. But does he have a point?

In the background of the president you see the Elysée Palace. On top the French flag (flying from right to left), and hanging from the eaves gutter a blue-white-red banner and a blue banner with a circle of stars. It is this blue-white-red banner Garraud is after. If we look how the hoist is situated in relation to the French flag, we notice that the colours are – as it were – dripping out of the flag. On the Palace, the banner hangs from the eaves gutter.

What would be the effect with this sequence if it was flying from a normal flag pole in the grounds? Is it the French flag? Yes, this is certainly French.

But if the same model is hanging from a horizontal pole – or from a gutter for that matter – the situation changes completely. Not much French-ness is to be detected in that case.

What happens if the French flag is 'stretched' instead of 'dripped'? Here the flag on the vertical pole fails to perform as something French, while the horizontal pole and the eaves gutter hanging are at their best.

The conclusion is that mr. Garraud has a point. France has established its national flag as being striated. The banner on the photograph transcends from that. From what point of view a flag should be 'read' is essential. The illustrations show that the hoist, in this case the eaves gutter, is the starting point. *A French flag never starts with three colours at the hoist, but with one (blue).*

To illustrate my point I have doctored with the official state portrait of the president of the French Republic and made it misinterpretation-proof.

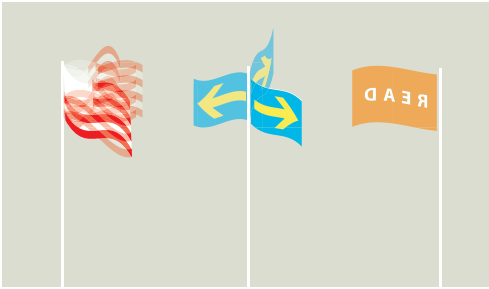
The mayor's scarf should also be revised (!).



Present...



...



Complexity through movement

Both sides are equally important, there should be no distinction

Reading direction is determined by the wind

Conclusion

Of the examples being presented one may draw conclusions that may be of help to make better flag designs, or to be a better commissioner for a designer:

- **The design should be suitable for movement by the wind**
- **The wind determines the 'reading direction'**
- **Both sides of a flag are equal**
- **The essence of a design must be clearly stated at the hoist**





CV

Theun Okkerse (Dordrecht, 1954), married with two children.

1971 - 1977 Academy of Fine Art Rotterdam (drawing, painting and designing)

1977 - present self employed as an artist and (graphic)designer

Member Teekengenootschp Pictura (est.1774), Dordrecht

Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde (est.1966) (Netherlands Vexillological Association)

Designs (to name a few):

1980 Verbal (Dutch) Flag

2003 Waterschap de Groote Waard

2008 Waterschap Hollandse Delta

2005 Okkerse Flag Test

2006 Mini Flag Test (simplified version of Okkerse Flag Test)

2005 Flag for Schouwen-Duiveland (proposal)

2008 Flag of the 25th ICV in Rotterdam

2010 New flag for a federal Belgium (proposal)

2013 Korps Mariniers Rotterdam (Royal Dutch Marine Corps, Rotterdam)

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Second live for the congress flag

After the the congress was over the Dutch Marine Corps stationed in Rotterdam adopted the flag. Now it is flown with with their coat of arms on it. It was on display at the corps 350th anniversary parade in the centre Rotterdam watched by a crowd thousands.

