3 Skulls, Wings & Outlaws – Motorcycle Club Insignia & Cultural Identity

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In *Objects of Desire: Design and Society 1750-1980*, Adrian Forty notes that “organisations which extend over a large geographical area, perhaps across different countries and languages, have always had difficulties in maintaining their cohesion” (Forty, 1986, p. 223). An outside observer may assume that outlaw motorcycle groups from around the world are claiming exactly such cohesion through the recognisable similarities in the designs of their “colours” – the patches worn on the back of their leather jackets. Whilst all such groups wish to buy into a common worldview, the desire for (internal) demarcation is clearly also at stake. In the case of outlaw motorcycle club insignia, Forty’s principle of cohesion through design can be seen to be held in permanent tension by a basic tenet of fashion, as extrapolated by Georg Simmel in his well-known essay of 1904 – fashionable people will seek to change their look as soon as it is copied by other aspiring groups. In the world of fashion, it is the social elite (the aristocracy) that remains at the forefront of fashion. The leading outlaw motorcycle gangs do not change, however; their dominance is reflected in the design of their insignia, and it is this design that other groups wish to copy. Far from, changing to keep ahead, the elite group allows others only a limited access to its look. From an historical perspective the case of outlaw motorcycle club insignia lies at the intersection of various icons and artefacts of an intercultural nature: film and myth mix with American military heritage. This paper will seek to trace the roots of these infamous designs.

The word ‘outlaw’ has its origins in the old English justice system and referred to someone who was punished by being deprived of the protection of law; literally such people were declared as ‘outlaws’. It is therefore perhaps a misnomer to call a club ‘outlaw’ and in Australia there is no accepted definition of what constitutes an ‘outlaw’ motorcycle club. In Canada, however, the police have a definition derived from a number of court rulings and in the USA there is also a definition that is generally accepted by both outlaw and non-outlaw clubs. It would seem that in Australia, for a motorcycle club to be considered ‘outlaw’, it must be accepted as such by existing outlaw clubs. In other words, if a motorcycle club wears a traditional outlaw back patch and is prepared to staunchly defend the right to wear that back patch against any opposition, it would be considered to be an ‘outlaw’ club. An example of this convention occurred recently in Wallsend, a suburb of Newcastle, New South Wales. A national outlaw motorcycle club opened a clubhouse and rode around on their motorcycles wearing a back patch, in effect claiming the territory. One evening a large white van stopped outside the newly established clubhouse and several men got out carrying baseball bats. They entered the clubhouse and attacked the occupants. Legs were broken and heads bloodied. The attackers then left. Alarmed neighbours called police but there were no arrests as the occupants of the club (in true ‘outlaw’ tradition) refused to give the police any information. It is common knowledge in the motorcycle fraternity that a
local outlaw motorcycle club was responsible for the attack on the clubhouse. The message is: wear the colours and claim the territory, but be prepared to defend them.

1 The Making of an Image

At the beginning of this research project I made a direct approach to motorcycle clubs for information about their background and membership. I contacted the Director of the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence, for the addresses of outlaw club clubhouses. However, due to legal constraints he was unable to give me the information. I next approached the editor of *Live to Ride* magazine, an Australian magazine that caters to Outlaw clubs. The editor was very supportive and suggested I write a letter to the magazine in which I requested information from the clubs. This was duly done but I soon realized that I had adopted a very naïve approach to finding information about a closed culture of which I was not a member. Assuming that members of such cultures will have respect for ‘academic’ status and reveal everything about their culture is a mistake made by many researchers. I received a total of three replies, none of which was from a club. Two replies were from individuals containing some very useful information, and the other was a threatening letter written in red ink suggesting I cease my research forthwith. Not deterred, in order to collect images of the various gang colours I attended a variety of motorcycle shows which attracted club members and inconspicuously took photographs.

My original thought was that the design of back patches may have come from the ‘nose art’ painted on the noses of World War II aircraft. However, I soon discovered that on the vast majority of aircraft the main subjects of ‘nose art’ were either cartoon characters or scantily dressed, nubile females. ‘Nose art’ has virtually none of the symbols of skulls and devils that appear in outlaw back patches. ‘Nose art’ was a good luck talisman for the crew of the aircraft, its purpose being to give them the luck required to successfully return from long dangerous missions over enemy territory – the last things the crews wanted on their aircraft were symbols of death and destruction such as devils and skulls. Naked ladies and cartoons were much more comforting. However, many of the squadron shoulder patches worn by the airmen did indeed have symbols of skulls and devils (see, for example, www.381st, 2003)). It is these shoulder patches which became the inspiration for some of the later outlaw back patches.

In 1941 Claire L Chennault, an American aviator who had written a book on the theory of air combat, was employed by the Chinese government of Chiang Kai-Shek to form a mercenary air force. Their mission was to fight the Japanese army that had invaded China. The pilots of the American Volunteer Group (AVG) or ‘Flying Tigers’ as it became known, all wore a large coloured patch sewn to the back of their leather flying jackets. The purpose of the patch, known as a ‘Blood Chit, was to inform people on the ground, should the airman get shot down, that he was a friend of the Chinese and should be offered assistance. This is the first instance of coloured patches being applied to leather jackets in large numbers. After America declared the war on Japan in 1941, the exploits of the ‘Flying Tigers’ were much lauded by the American media and the fliers were given hero status. In 1942 John Wayne stared in a movie loosely based on the ‘Flying Tigers’ which brought the leather jacket and back patch combination to a wider audience. There is a further ‘Flying Tiger’ link to outlaw clubs. One of the three squadrons established by Chennault was called the ‘Hells Angels’, the others being the ‘Adam and Eve’ and the ‘Panda Bears’. However,
the Hells Angels’ insignia painted on the aircraft was a scantily dressed female with wings and halo, and bears no relationship to the back patch insignia of the later Hells Angels Motorcycle Club.

Still from *Flying Tigers* starring John Wayne.

In July 1947 an incident took place in the Southern California town of Hollister which became the basis for the notoriety of outlaw motorcycle clubs. Twelve thousand motorcyclists had turned up for the American Motorcycle Association (AMA) annual three-day ‘Gypsy Tour’ and flat track racing. Not all the clubs in attendance were members of the AMA. Clubs such as the Booze Fighters, the Pissed Off Bastards of Bloomington, the Winos, Satan’s Sinners and the Galloping Ghosts, Market Street Commandos, 13 Rebels and Yellow Jackets were also in attendance. After much consumption of alcohol a mild riot ensued with the local police needing to call in out-of-town police to help quell the disturbance. Fifty-nine people were arrested. The majority of motorcyclists at Hollister were not involved and some of the town’s residents did not know anything had happened until they read about it in the paper (Brown & McDirmid, 2000, p. 352).

A photograph taken by Barney Peterson of the *San Francisco Chronicle* showing a drunken motorcyclist on a Harley Davidson surrounded by beer bottles appeared in *Life* magazine and was picked up by Associated Press and shown around the world. The rearrangement of the bottles in a second unpublished shot suggests it was a staged photograph but this second image shows a club insignia with wings and a skull. The caption with the photograph claimed that 4000 members of a motorcycle club had roared into Hollister and taken the town over (*Life*, 1947). The following year, after some further trouble at Riverside, the AMA secretary at the time Lin A Kuchler said “the disreputable cyclists are possibly one percent of the total number of motorcyclists; only one percent are hoodlums and troublemakers” (Zierl & Rebmann, 1998). The Riverside Police Chief described the motorcycle hoodlums for the first time in public as “outlaws”. The non-AMA clubs, in the tradition of taking the insults of the enemy as a badge of honour, became ‘outlaws’ and those described by Koehler as “one percenters” proudly wore a ‘1%’ badge on their jackets and vests, a tradition that continues today.
The incident was given further notoriety when Stanley Kramer’s film the *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin, was released in 1953. The film itself was based on short story entitled *The Cyclists’ Raid* by Frank Rooney which appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* (Barger & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 25). The plot was very loosely based on the Hollister incident with Marlon Brando playing ‘Johnny’, the enigmatic leader of the ‘Black Rebels Motorcycle Club’. The club’s insignia – a skull and crossed pistons – is painted on the back of a black leather jacket. The ‘Outlaws’ Motorcycle Club that has chapters around the world now uses a very similar design.
Sonny Barger, the founder of the Oakland chapter of the Hells Angels, in his book *Hells Angel* states he had more in common with Lee Marvin’s character Chino, as he was more unkempt than Brando’s character and he rode a chopped Harley Davidson. Brando himself rode an English made Triumph and wore a uniform. The Hells Angels is the archetypical outlaw motorcycle club and was one of the first to be established. The name Hell’s Angels was used by several groups long before the first chapter of the Hell’s Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) was formed in Fontana, California in 1948. A World War I fighter squadron used the name as did an aircraft stunt team in the 1930s and 1940s. As previously mentioned, a squadron of the Flying Tigers used the name as did the 303RD bomber group of the USAF based in England. The Hells Angels is currently the largest Outlaw Motorcycle Club in the USA. It was the first to go international with chapters in thirteen countries including Holland, Denmark, Australia, Germany, Canada, the UK, France, Switzerland, Brazil, South Africa, Norway, Sweden and New Zealand. The format of both the HAMC organization and back patch has influenced the way that most other outlaw clubs conduct business around the world. The Hells Angels created a sub-culture, which has seen the growth of their organization as well as the establishment of many similar styled motorcycle gangs throughout the world. (Davis, 1982, p. 43).

Still from Rolling Stone’s Altamont concert 1969

Up until at least 1969 the Hells Angels sported two versions of their back patch, the original small patch nicknamed the ‘bumble bee’ patch and the larger ‘deathshhead patch. Both patches were based on World War II airforce shoulder patches. The smaller patch is probably based on that of the 85th Fighter Squadron and the larger ‘deathshhead’ patch was designed by Frank Sadliek, a past president of the San Francisco chapter of the HAMC, and is probably based on the 552nd Medium Bomber Squadron.
The Backpatch in Australia

I have identified 36 Australian ‘outlaw’ motorcycle clubs – the Bandidos, Black Ulans, Bros, Club Derose, Coffin Cheaters (3), Comancheros, Cossacks, Descendants, Devil’s Henchmen, Finks, Foolish Few, Fourth Reich, Gladiators, God’s Garbage, Gypsy Jokers, Hell’s Angels, Highway 61, Highwaymen, Immortals, Iron Horsemen, Life and Death, Lone Wolf, Mob Shitters, Nomads, Odins Warriors, Outcasts, Outlaws, Rebels, Renegades, Satan’s Riders, Satan’s Sinners, Satan’s Soldiers, Tramps and Vandiemans.– and collected the back patch images for 30 of these.

Twenty of the Australian patches I have been able to record follow the Hells Angel model almost exactly with only minor changes to the position of the M.C. element. Several use a similar typeface. In addition, four follow this model very closely, with variations in the shape of the bottom rocker or four-part format. The Hells Angels pattern consists of four elements. First, the top ‘rocker’ (presumably the name comes from the similarity to the bottom rail on a rocking chair) stating the club name in a Semi-Ornamental woodcut typeface similar to American Tuscan. On the patch no apostrophe is used before the ‘s’ of ‘Hells’. Second, the ‘death’shead’ insignia as designed by Frank Sadliek and located in the centre of the design. Third, the bottom rocker, stating the country, state or area where the chapter is located. In the USA the Hells Angels will not allow any club to put a state on the bottom rocker if the Hells Angels have claimed it beforehand. Fourth, a small square patch
to the middle right with the letters M.C. meaning Motorcycle Club. This is in a different sans serif typeface than the top and bottom rockers. I suspect that the typeface chosen for the top and bottom rocker was influenced by the typeface used on posters for the movie *Gone With the Wind* that was released in 1939. The type is unusual, and it is unlikely that the HAMC at that time would have employed a typographer to select a typeface for them.

![Hells Angels Motorcycle Club](image1.png)

Of the thirty patches I have recorded only four do not have one or more of the following elements: Skulls/Demons (17); Wings (12); Cartoon characters (3). Four patches do not have any of the common skull/wing/cartoon images. They are the snarling wolf graphic of the Lone Wolf patch; skeletal handshake on the Bros patch; a Confederate flag on the Rebels patch (this is the biggest outlaw club in Australia) and a traditional tattoo design on the Life and Death patch.

The symbolism of the wings in the back patch design is twofold. It refers back to the World War II air force shoulder patches that are the original influence of many of the patches. Since the air force is in the business of flying the symbolism is obvious. Wings are also a symbol for speed and flight. Many people, after their first ride on a motorcycle, refer to the experience as the nearest thing to flying they could imagine. Motorcycle manufactures have long been aware of this symbolism and over the years many Motorcycle Company logo and tank emblems have included a wing or wings. Motorcycle Companies that have used a wing motif include: ABC, Ace, Dax, Harley Davidson, Honda, Henderson, Jawa, Matchless, Moto Guzzi, Royal Enfield, Victoria, and no doubt many more.

The symbolism of the skull in the design of the patches is more complex. In Western culture the skull has symbolised various things. It is the Christian symbol for St Francis of Assisi, St Jerome, St Mary Magdalene and St Paul. A skull with crossed bones is a symbol for death, and a flag with a skull and crossed bones is an emblem of pirates. The skull, on the other hand, is also a symbol of the vital life force contained in the head. Various military units have used the skull and crossed bones as a hat badge including the hat badge of an Austrian Cavalry Officer (circa 1860) and an SS officer’s cap badge. The symbolism for the skull in both these examples is that the wearer is a soldier and deals in
death. A skull with crossed bones is also the international container symbol for toxic material. Skulls as a design feature are very common on motorcycles ridden by both outlaw and non-outlaw motorcyclists.

The images of cartoon characters are ‘The Fat Mexican’ of the Bandidos (originally an American club patch from Texas), ‘Taz’ the Tasmanian Devil from the Warner Brothers cartoon used by the Vandiemans (this would perhaps give the impression the Vandiemans are from Tasmania, but they are in fact Melbourne-based), and ‘Bung’ or ‘Bung Fink’ the drunken jester from the Wizard of Id cartoons used by the Finks (the colour of the bottle and the jester’s pants indicate which Australian state the wearer is from). Cartoon characters on back patches provide a link to a previous era when an outlaw motorcycle club was more about riding with like-minded mates, drinking to excess and behaving in an uncouth anti-social manner. This was in the days before outlaw clubs were considered to be organised crime gangs by the authorities and before some clubs started dealing in methamphetamine. The ‘Booze Fighters’ back patch depicted a bottle of beer. An early Sydney club was ‘The Gronks’ whose back patch was a hairy caveman carrying a club. Another early club was ‘The Galloping Gooses’ who had a goose in jackboots as their back patch. The back patches of the ‘Finks’, the ‘Bandidos’ and the ‘Vandiemans’ are examples that are still in use. A good example of a change in design ethos from the earlier patches can be seen in the comparison of the older American “Gypsy Joker” patch and the later Australian “Gypsy Jokers” patch. However, it would be a mistake to presume that because the patches of “The Finks”, “Vandiemans” and the “Bandidos” display cartoons and not skulls, that they are not ‘outlaw’ clubs.

Outlaw clubs in Australia and very careful about whom they admit as members. For example, they do not allow women to be members, and so it is impossible for women to wear an outlaw back patch. In the early days of outlaw clubs in the US, women were allowed to be members of the Hells Angels but this later changed. Women were also allowed to wear club colours if they were riding ‘two up’. This was because the rider’s back patch would not be exposed to the public if someone were sitting behind him. The woman had to return the colours as soon as she got off the bike. This was also to change and now only initiated club members are allowed to wear a back patch. In Australia the closest a female can get to wear club colours is if she becomes a long-term partner of a club member and gets to wear a ‘Property Of’ patch. By 1999 there were two female-only motorcycle clubs, these being the ‘Vixen’ club and ‘DOB’ (Dykes On Bikes). Both clubs avoided using skull symbols in their patch, but the DOB patch does have wings. Neither of these clubs could be considered ‘outlaw’.

Generally speaking Australian outlaw clubs will not allow any other motorcycle club to wear a large coloured back patch, particularly if it is in the traditional outlaw format. There are a few exceptions however, including members of overseas clubs visiting Australia for a limited time, Christian Motorcycle Clubs, and the Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club. Some other clubs such as ‘The Ulysses’ club do wear a back patch but it is not coloured or in the traditional format. Some Harley Owners Group (HOG) members wear a coloured patch on the back of their jackets but it always small and without a top or bottom rocker, unlike the USA HOG patches that are full sized with top rocker. The Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club wears what appears to be an outlaw patch and so it should, as it is a direct copy of the patch worn by the ‘Gravediggers’ in Sandy Harbutt’s
cult Australian biker movie *Stone* released in 1974. Christian Motorcycle Clubs always replace the M.C. element in their back patches with “C.M.C.” meaning ‘Christian Motorcycle Club’ or “M.M.” meaning ‘Motorcycle Ministry’. Outlaw clubs see them as no threat and therefore allow the patches to be worn.

Many of the clubs realise what a powerful symbol the outlaw back patch is and claim copyright on them. The Hells Angels announce on their web site that:

*HAMC has copyrighted the name Hells Angels (in any form of spelling) in the US and internationally along with variations of the “Deathshead” insignia of the HAMC. These trademarks and copyright are aggressively protected by HAMC, Inc.* (Hells Angels, 2003)

It should be noted that the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club became an incorporated company in 1968 and a trademark granted in 1972. You might expect an ‘outlaw’ motorcycle club to protect its copyright with a broken bottle and a bike chain, but in the US in June 1995 the Hells Angels sued in court to protect their copyright. In Australia the ‘Bandidos’ back patch even has a copyright symbol on the patch itself along with the initials of the copyright holder. During the course of this research I contacted Sonny Barger, the legendary founder of the Oakland Chapter of the Hells Angels, for information on the design of the HAMC patch, I received a reply from Fritz Clapp, ‘the club’s trade mark attorney’ and also Sonny’s ‘business manager’.

The commodification of culture was a major feature of the 20th century and design played an important part in this process. As Adrian Forty has noted:

> Of all the ways in which design can influence the way we think, the only one to have been acknowledged widely has been its use to express the identity of organizations. Empires, armies, navies, religious orders and modern corporations have all used design to convey ideas about what they are like both to insiders and to the outside world. (Forty, 1986, p. 222)

Hesket has further argued, “Objects and environments can be used by people to construct a sense of who they are, to express their sense of identity.” The construction of identity, however, goes much further than an expression of who some one is for it ‘can be a deliberate attempt by individuals and organizations, even nations, to create a particular image and meaning intended to shape, even pre-empt, what others perceive and understand” (Heskett, 2002, p. 125). While a good deal of attention has been paid to the formation of corporate symbols – the Golden Arches of McDonalds and the logo and bottle design of Coca Cola – almost no attention has been paid to the design of outlaw motorcycle patches. As has been argued in this paper, however, this design, first developed by the Hells Angels and later adopted by outlaw motorcycle clubs around the world including Australia, has an interesting history, a clever design and is extremely effective in expressing group identity.

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Note
The author has been unable to determine the ownership of copyright in all of the photographs in this article, but acknowledge(s) that ownership in the insignia design itself rests with the Australian Outlaws Motorcycle Clubs involved. Use of the images has been made in good faith as a “fair dealing” for the purposes of research, pursuant to the Copyright Act 1968.

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