

THE USE OF THE EAGLE IN SWORD DECORATION

By Donald E. Upchurch



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Mr. President, members of the Society, animals for sword decoration did not become popular in this country until the middle of the eighteenth century. At that time the lion head came into favor as a sword pommel. Later, other forms joined the lion, such as the dog and the eagle. Then, in 1782, by an act of the Continental Congress, the bald eagle became the national emblem, a choice that prompted Benjamin Franklin to comment that the eagle was "a bird of bad moral character." Franklin would have preferred the turkey: "he is a bird of courage, and would not hesitate to attack a Grenadier of the British Guards." But this protest was to no avail. The eagle was firmly established as an American symbol and became the most popular one ever devised. Just a further thought on Franklin's choice. I believe my reaction would have been somewhat less than the joyous one that it was if Neil Armstrong had announced to a breathless world that: "the turkey had landed."

It has always caused me to wonder why, in the course of things, the sword evolved into two distinct varieties — the plain for enlisted ranks, the fancy for officers, while the gun did not. I cannot understand why an officer would use a decorated sword but a relatively plain firearm when both were equally important to his self defense. During the time of the wheellock the firearm was considered almost an art form. Since that time firearm decoration deteriorated until the officers firearm of the eighteenth century

was nearly devoid of embellishment. The sword meanwhile, continued to be highly decorated and remains so to the present day. It is an intriguing question for which there is no pat answer.

Ever since the late eighteenth century the eagle has been a favorite in every sort of decoration, not the least of which was the officer's personal sidearm — his sword. The first use of eagles in sword decoration, as I have mentioned above, was in pommels such as those used on the early silverhilts, and that famous one on the brass hilted saber by Prahl. Unfortunately I cannot show you a picture of these rare swords.

A little later, about 1790, we find a proliferation of eagles such as on the blade of this 1787 Infantry officers hanger shown in photo no. 1 and made in France or Germany. Notice the froglegged eagle which is typical of this earlier period and is also found on other swords such as the "American Light Horse," and "Pennsylvania Light Dragoons" sabers. Belt plates and other military accoutrement of the period also show this styling.

Pommels are typified by this eagle of the Philadelphia style on an early naval dirk shown in photo no. 2. The rakish lines and fierce visage is typical and exemplifies a young nation just beginning to find itself in the world. In my opinion this styling has never been surpassed.

The pommel in photo no. 3 was English made and was very popular around 1800. Remove the crest and you would have the Baltimore styling. Perhaps this English design was copied from our Baltimore pommels. In those days of poor communication and individual choice the Philadelphia and Baltimore schools of pommel design developed side by side and both became quite popular, especially in the silverhilted sword.

About the same period, France developed a distinctly different style for export to this country as shown in photo no. 4. The long neck and naturalistic features were actually much closer to the real thing but not widely accepted. It would seem the average officer preferred a more fanciful concept.

About 1810, following English styling, the eagle on knucklebow was introduced as illustrated by photo no. 5. It did not prove popular judging by surviving specimens of which I have seen no more than half a dozen. Perhaps because of the War with England in 1812 and the subsequent rejection of all things English, was this style of guard so short lived.

The following two photos are from the same sword and typify the period 1815 - 1825. Note the open beak in photo no. 6 which I assume was intended for a sword knot though it shows no evidence of ever having been used for one, and such a use would have been difficult. The elongated form with flat crown became fairly standard. Very popular, it is found on the vast bulk of eagle hilted swords of this period with or without backstraps.

Swords of this period are equipped with either a langet, or a large counter-guard as shown in photo no. 7. The full spread winged eagle was the accepted decoration for either one. Perhaps this full flowering of the American eagle with the shield on its breast was due to the exuberance of patriotism following the War of 1812.

Photo no. 8 illustrates the same period and shows the full development of the pommel style. The sword itself is presentation and of very high quality throughout. All fittings are of exceptional workmanship. Note the delicate ringlets of feathers on the pommel, and unusual and fine feature.

Blade decoration, as shown in photo no. 9 on a sword of about 1815 still retains the frog-legged aspect but is distinctly more 'normal' than that shown on the 1787 sword shown in photo no. 1. There is some opinion among collectors that favor the idea of counting stars in the decoration to determine within a few years of when it was made. This sword exhibits fifteen stars and the fifteenth state— Kentucky— was admitted in 1792, a period much too early for this sword. Eighteen states had been admitted by the time this sword was made. In my opinion there is no correlation between the number of stars used in the decoration and the time of its manufacture.

The scabbard detail in photo no. 10 shows especially well how the eagle was used to fill a narrow space. Note he is shown from the side, wings raised, and looking over his shoulder. Though the traditional olive branch is here, there apparently was not enough room for the arrows and they were left out. The attitude of the wings reminds me of the winged lions common in ancient Sumerian art. This might be the result of the Greek revival period in American artistic effort.

In photo no. 11 a slightly later styling of about 1840 is shown. It definitely gives me the impression of a 'chicken hawk.' Still shown from the side, and with wings still upraised, an attempt is made to fill the middle area on an all brass scabbard by a unique use of the shield, arrows, and olive branch. This use has doubled the area taken in photo 10. The shield and lightning bolts, though effective, detract from the eagle in my opinion.

By 1840 the eagle as pommel decoration had all but disappeared. As in France (we were always copying somebody) the Phrygian helmet pommel was coming into vogue. Photo no. 12 illustrates a pommel from an early 1840 Medical sword and was about all that was left on regular swords. Though all the elements are here, they are crammed into an oval medallion. The arrows and olive branch are curled up under the wings.

However, special presentation swords occasionally used the eagle in some way, as on the fine Mexican War presentation sword shown in photo no. 13. Note the unusual pommel resembling a vulture waiting for its meal. The staring eyes and oversize claws are unusual features. I can't understand why the Ames Mfg. Co. who made the piece, would use such an ungainly style on such an exceptionally fine piece.

Once again the same sword is shown in photo no. 15 but this time the scabbard throat. Note the standard spread-winged eagle but viewed slightly from the side. It is interesting to note that on this particular sword, the eagle shown is completely covered by the guard when the sword is sheathed (see photo 14).

The guard of the same sword is an excellent illustration of the eagle used to form the entire guard and is shown in photo no. 14. Though this was a rare feature it is met with occasionally. The shield is part of the guard and fits up into the eagle as far as the eagle's head.

A most unusual eagle sitting on a nest is seen in photo no. 16. This is the only instance of this styling that I have ever seen, and was found on a foot officer's sword of about 1860 that was made in Europe. I have never been able to figure out the meaning of the nest. Perhaps it refers to the states. This would be a logical explanation is only conjecture.

The blade of the same sword and is shown in figure 17, features a fine eagle that harks back to the one used in 1800 and was seen in photo no. 5. This eagle is very well executed as is the entire sword. The etcher is unknown but he was indeed an artist.

By way of contrast, this eagle as shown in photo 18 on an 1850 staff and field officer's sword, illustrates the decadent decorating efforts of the Ames Mfg. Co. on their run of the mill production. The quality of this eagle is the exact opposite of that shown in photo 17. It looks to me as if it was dashed off in one minute flat by a blind man. No thought or effort was expended in this decorating failure.

After the Civil War the use of the sword declined rapidly, and with it, the use of the eagle as decoration. This 1872 cavalry officer's sword offers a rare and minor use of the eagle (photo 19). Though the picture is not too clear, it is used to fill the top forward area of the guard.

The eagle fell into disuse for many years. It was revived for the pommel of this 1902 style sword with presentation dated 1935 (photo 20). As in the German styling (again we copy) the eyes are made of colored



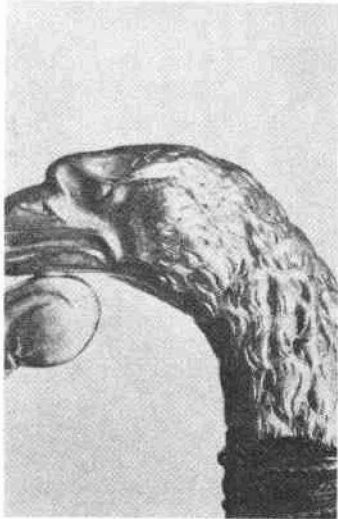
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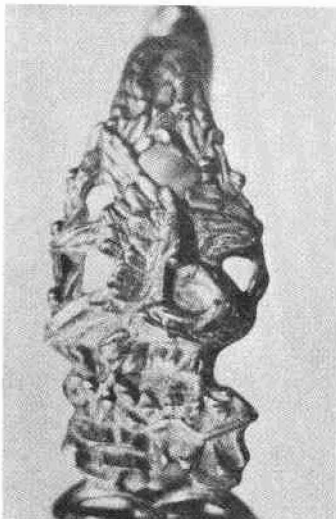
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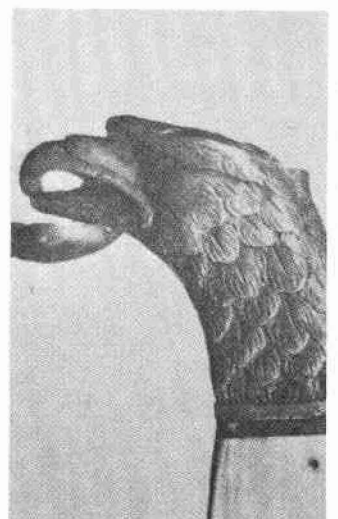
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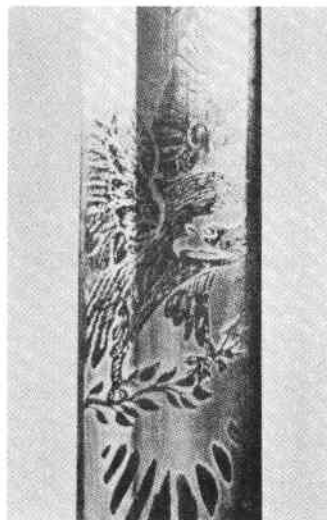
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#16



#17



#18

glass and the knuckle bow enters the mouth. Both features were unknown in earlier days. The head is finely modelled but does have more of the appearance of a sparrow than an eagle.

We have seen the eagle in use after adoption as the national emblem, swell to a crescendo of use after 1800 until about 1830, then decline rapidly until it almost disappeared, surfacing only occasionally for use on a special presentation.

I would like to thank John Hammer for the use of a specimen from his collection and his help in the photography. Also Rolfe Holbrook for the use of a specimen from his collection.



#19



#20