



# WHAT'S IN YOUR MUSEUM?

by Rick Montgomery

## The Design of the Corvette Logo

**H**ave you ever wondered how the Corvette logo came to be? It is an interesting story with some surprising twists and turns during its development and birth.

The story begins in 1952 as the new Corvette was being prepared for introduction at the GM Motorama show in New York City. Robert Bartholomew, an Interior Designer at Chevrolet Design, was given the assignment of developing the Corvette logo to adorn the nose emblem, as well as the steering wheel hub of the new sports car. Bartholomew had a flair for modern yet unobtrusive styling. He liked to express an air of sophistication in his work and wanted to reflect precision, quality, and good taste. But this assignment was more than just modifying an existing concept to reflect the theme of the vehicle. It was to develop the emblem representing the soul of a brand new type of American car. It had to be unique, be easily recognized, and express the heritage of the vehicle. Bartholomew had a daunting task. And it had to be completed in a matter of weeks.

Even back in 1952, and even with only a 6-cylinder engine and two-speed automatic transmission, Chevrolet wanted the Corvette to be recognized as a performance car. That was one theme Bartholomew decided to highlight in his emblem design. The Corvette was also uniquely American; there was no other American car like it. Thus, another theme to highlight. With these two major themes in mind Bartholomew developed the logo and emblems for the new show car.

His design was simple and clean. Two crossed flags on a soft white background to represent performance on the race track. The right flag was a waving checker,

symbolizing a race winner. The left flag was a waving American flag, shouting: "This is an American Automobile." Above the crossed flags, in block letters the name CHEVROLET. Below the flags, in crisp, cursive styling, the name of the new sports car, CORVETTE. Simple yet striking, the design was modern, unlike many of the flamboyant logos of the day which had been designed in the 1920's and 1930's. It was perfect for the new show car.

Except for one thing.

Bartholomew had finished the design and had the two emblems fabricated. They were beautiful. They were now ready for installation on the show car, which was already on its way to the New York Motorama. Every aspect of a vehicle intended to be a show car gets scrutinized. Fit, finish, paint, interior, chrome, vehicle stance, display placement, all get reviewed and analyzed before final approval. When the new emblems were inspected by the General Motors Public Relations and Legal folks, they found a significant error. The American flag. Bartholomew was unaware that it was illegal to use an image of the American flag on a commercial product. It had to go.





Not only was a redesign necessary, but the new emblems had to be completed in time for the Motorama opening on January 16, only days away.

Bartholomew's initial design was well-founded and matched the theme for the new sports car. It was obvious that all that needed to be done was to replace the image of the American flag with a different flag design. But what flag? What should be depicted? What design would match the Corvette theme? Bartholomew was back to square one. He decided to have the new flag reflect Chevrolet's heritage and to include symbols which honored its history. The Chevrolet "Bow-Tie", which became the Chevrolet insignia shortly after its incorporation, was a must. But more was needed to complete the design. Bartholomew decided to honor Chevrolet's namesake, Louis Chevrolet, by including a symbolic *Fleur-de-lis*, a French word meaning "Flower of the Lily." The *Fleur-de-lis* design had been used for hundreds of years in Europe as a symbol for peace and purity. It was most often used by French royalty but was also found on English, Welsh, and other European family Coats-of-Arms.



Chevrolet Motor Division had already researched the Chevrolet family background. It learned that Louis and his brothers had immigrated to the United States from France, where they had lived for many years. Chevy may have assumed Louis had been born in France. What more appropriate symbol to honor Louis Chevrolet than the *Fleur-de-lis*? Bartholomew decided to include it in his new flag design. A Bow-Tie and a *Fleur-de-lis*; the new design was established.

Out of such hectic and pressure-packed circumstances was the Corvette logo born. It is a testimony

to Bartholomew's superb design that it has remained virtually unchanged for over 55 years.

The new emblems were fabricated then shipped to New York for installation on the Corvette. But what happened to the original American flag emblem? Fortunately it was kept safely by Chevrolet. And, thanks to the generosity of the Chevrolet Motor Division, it was donated to the National Corvette Museum. The original nose emblem is proudly displayed at the NCM and can be seen as you begin your tour of Corvette history. It is one of the most prized items in the NCM collection, where visitors view it with a sense of hushed reverence.

Robert Bartholomew is also credited with another unique feature of the Corvette; the Chevrolet and Corvette cursive script. The 1953 Corvette has the name "Chevrolet" in script form on the front fenders just below the belt line. Then, later, a script "Corvette" was placed on V-8 engine valve covers. Both of these designs came from Robert Bartholomew and were the result of his personal handwriting style. As a designer, Bartholomew had a flair for styling. It is no surprise then that even his personal handwriting was distinctive and stylish. When he wrote "Chevrolet" and "Corvette" the style was so pleasing Chevrolet decided to use it as the design for its name. Check out some Chevrolet sales literature of the period and you'll see the Bartholomew influence. Also check out some Corvette valve covers of the 1950's or 1960's. The cursive "Corvette" on them is pure Bartholomew.

Robert Bartholomew is an unknown and unsung contributor to the history of the Corvette.

There is one question, however, that needs some consideration. Is the *Fleur-de-lis* the proper symbol to honor Louis Chevrolet? Should it correctly have been a Swiss Cross? Louis Chevrolet was born in Switzerland, so he was of Swiss descent, not French. It is not clear whether he considered himself French or Swiss, but both nations had an influence in his life. Had he been alive in 1952, he may have asked Robert Bartholomew to modify his design, yet again, to show a Swiss Cross rather than a *Fleur-de-lis*.

We will never know. But the *Fleur-de-lis* has now been established as a symbol of Corvette. May it remain so for years to come. ■