Skulls & Crossbones: America’s Consumptions of Pirate Symbolism

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**Introduction: Pirate Symbols in American Institutions**

Perhaps it was America’s founding by outsider malcontents, or maybe it is the portrayal of the irascible Captain Jack Sparrow so deftly played by Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Whatever the reason, America has a long history and fascination with pirates and their symbolism.

A recent Google search for Pirate Museums in the United States shows the term *pirate* associated with 17 museums in the USA. From Maine to San Diego, the coastal states have rich recorded histories of pirates. Sports teams such as the *Pittsburgh Pirates* of the NBL and the *Tampa Bay Buccaneers* and *Oakland Raiders* of the NFL adopted pirate symbols for their logos. The Raiders in particular sport their image of outlaws, thugs and thieves proudly. Fans are rabid and frenzied members of “Raider Nation.” Raider team merchandise is consistently in the top NFL team sales nationwide.

Pirate themes abound in other popular culture media outlets. *The Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise is hugely popular with the brand extending as far as the candy M&Ms. The first episode of the latest season of the United States’ version of the television show *Wife Swap* features a family who follows a code they call ‘pirattitude’ that focuses on questioning societal conformity.

In this presentation, I examine of how pirate flag symbols, predominantly the *skull and crossbones*, have been acculturated into consumer society through fashion. The proliferation of skull & crossbones and other renditions of the pirate flag as a fashion
motif is quite noticeable at every level – from designer to bridge to moderate and in every category: Men’s, Women’s, Youth, Children’s and Infant. From Ralph Lauren’s shop Rugby, to tee shirts by Rogues Gallery, to the rise of clothing chain stores such as Hot Topic, the skull & crossbones design is being consumed by Americans at an astounding rate. Examples of these styles, their origins and implications for the future of this fashion motif in consumer culture will be discussed.

**Similarities between Pirate and American Ideology**

While on the surface it appears that the American love affair with pirates is based on their romanticized archetypes through popular culture - *Treasure Island*, *Peter Pan*, *the Pirates of Penzance* and more recently *Pirates of the Caribbean*, in fact, American ideology shares many of the same values as pirate ideology - Rebellion against government in search of freedom; An established Democracy where each man is considered equal and there is justice for all; Self rule created by the people for the people; Unity and loyalty to your group; Pioneering new frontiers, embracing adventure and an entrepreneurial spirit; Inclusion of peoples from multiple cultures and classes.

**Conditions that lead to the Golden Age of Piracy (1690-1730)**

In the late 1600’s and early 1700’s a series of events occurred that paved the way for the Golden Age of Piracy. In 1651, the English government passed the Navigation Acts which stipulated that no goods could be brought into England or her colonies, for example North America, except in British ships with British crews and enormous taxes leading to a huge black market. In 1689, King James I made peace with Spain ending war. During the 18th century a network of shipping lanes and ports were firmly
established for the transport of goods predominantly by the British, Dutch, French and Spanish. Finally, in 1713 the War of Spanish Succession ended and with it the wealth enjoyed by the privateers of the day who were able to keep 100% of their plunder. The ranks of unemployed navy men and privateers burgeoned. During wartime, many of the navy men had lived under harsh and unjust rule and the privateers who had enjoyed wealth from their sanctioned pillaging found their resources cut off. Both factions were disgruntled. These conditions coupled with a large market for untaxed goods in North America gave rise to the Golden Age of Piracy.¹

**Articles of Piracy OR The Pirate Constitution**

Fed up with poor treatment and lack of opportunity, many seamen joined together with former privateers and began a life of piracy. Bands of Pirates constructed a social structure based on a foundation of ancient and medieval maritime life.² “Pirates constructed that world in contradistinction to ways of the world they left behind, in particular to its salient figures of power, the merchant captain and the royal official, and to the system of authority those figures represented and enforced.”³ Each crew began with a written document of Articles that is surprisingly similar across all groups. Articles included instructions on allocation of authority, distribution of plunder, and enforcement of discipline. The articles allowed the pirates to form a rough, improvised, egalitarian social order with authority in the hands of the collective crew.⁴

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Each set of Articles was determined and signed by the crew. Each crewmember was a free man with a voice in the decision-making process and the ability to move up the ship’s ranks or leave the pirate life. Each had one vote. Each boat elected a Captain who had complete authority in fighting, chasing and being chased. They also elected a Quartermaster who championed the interest of the crew, adjudicating minor disputes and distributing food and money. In general, the plunder was distributed based on the skill level and duties of the crewman who was considered to be a risk-sharing partner with the lowest level receiving 1 share. Generally, the Captain, Quartermaster and a few others like the gunner, carpenter, sail maker and surgeon who were integral in keeping the boat and crew going, got 11/2 - 2 shares of the plunder.

The ship was governed by the crew in total, or by the “Council” with the crew voting on their decisions. Each ship set up a disability fund to care for those debilitated by accidents, protect skills, enhance recruitment and maintain loyalty among the group. Finally, the Articles covered discipline that was decided by the majority. Three major methods of discipline were employed. Fights were settled with a duel of pistols followed by swords on land. Disruptive crewmen were marooned on an island. The most egregious crimes, usually a Captain who abused his power, lead to execution. Swearing an oath of honor and signing the Articles cemented the crew.

During the Golden Age of Piracy, Pirates established an elaborate social code that included a system of rule, custom and symbol, a collective ethos where they banded

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5 Croce, p. 8.5
6 Rediker, pp. 262-264.
7 Croce, p. 8.5
8 Rediker, pp. 263-268.
together against common threats. The best know symbol of piracy is the pirate flag, also known as the Jolly Roger.

**The Jolly Roger OR ‘The Banner of King Death’**

“For more than two centuries a black flag with a white skull and crossbones emblazoned on it has been the symbol for pirates throughout the Western World. In this form it appears in all the pirate stories from Walter Scott to Robert Louis Stevenson, and the artists took their lead from the writers. The masterful pictures of Howard Pyle’s Book of Pirates and N. C. Wyeth’s illustrations to the 1911 edition of Treasure Island no doubt helped to fix the image in the people’s minds, and it was constantly reinforced by its use on the stage and screen.”

With this particular image so deeply embedded in Western culture as THE symbol of piracy, it is surprising to note that the Jolly Roger is only one of many pirate flags. For many centuries Spanish cemeteries were often marked with campo santo or actual skulls and bones leading to their symbolic association with the concept of death. Traditionally, sea Captain’s used the symbol of the skull to mark a death at sea. Pirates adopted this symbol and other common symbolism of the day on their flags to strike mortal terror and conjure fear and dread in their prey. Working with common symbolism of the day – dancing skeletons, i.e. dancing with death; raised glasses, i.e. toasting death; weapons, i.e. slaughter to come; hourglasses and wings, i.e. time running out or flying away, each pirate combined typical symbols of skulls, crossed bones, skeletons, daggers,

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cutlasses, spears, bleeding hearts, hour glasses, raised glasses, wings and initials into a logo that depicted their individual branded identity based on their personal legends. Some pirates furthered their brand identity through brand extension, offering a variety of iterations. Bartholomew Roberts also known as Black Bart produced one flag that showed his figure standing on the skull of a Barbadian’s head and a Martinican’s head to express his rage at their respective authorities trying to capture him.12

The skull and crossbones with more than 2500 men sailing under it13 and the skull and cutlass became the most common of the marks. Pirate flags became known as “Jolly Roger”- ‘the banner of King Death.’ There are three schools of thought on the origin of the name. The most commonly found explanation: Jolly Roger comes from the French ‘jolie rouge’ meaning ‘pretty red’ which had been used to describe the blood red banners flown by privateers. The second theory bases the Jolly Roger on the Jolly Rogue where Rogue was replaced by the English Roger, a term for vagabond, beggar or vagrant. The third theory suggests that it is the flag of the Devil, also known as ‘Old Roger.’14

Symbols were flown on red or black grounds. There are two conflicting theories on this. One suggests that the red ground indicated battle, while the black flag indicated death.15 The second suggests that pirates used the privateers’ signals where black warned against resistance and red indicated there would be no mercy.16 Which ever is true, there is no doubt that merchant seamen during the Golden Age of Piracy (1690-1730) did not want to see either a red or black pirate flag!

12 Cordingly, p.116.
13 Rediker, p.278.
14 www.kiper.org
**The First to co-opt the Symbol**

It is interesting to note that the symbol of lawlessness was first adopted by the antithesis of pirates, the military. By 1759 the 17th Lancers of the British Army had co-opted the skull and crossbones as its cap badge, becoming known as the ‘Death or Glory Boys’. The present day successors, The Queen’s Royal Lancers continue its use today. US Marine Corps reconnaissance battalions also use this emblem. In 1914, submarines of the Royal Navy began flying the flag upon return from a successful combat mission where some action had taken place. In WWII this became common practice for the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy indicating bravado and stealth. Today, the Jolly Roger is the emblem of the Royal Navy Submarine Service. US Navy Aviators adopted the symbol in 1943 and it is still in active use today.

**Modern Day Subcultures Appropriate and Redefine the Meaning of the Symbol**

Teen subcultures – Surfers/Skaters, Bikers, Rockers, Goths, Skinheads, Punks and Metal adopted the skull to symbolize dissent, angst and misunderstanding. While all these subcultures cultivated a rogue identity, each group developed a meaning for the symbol within the context of their subculture’s philosophy. Goths romanticized the mystical dark side. Skinheads adopted the Aryan intimidation practice. Bikers and Surf/Skate culture used the symbol as a sign of cheating or defying death. Punks used the symbols to demonstrate nihilist dissent.

The two most mainstream subcultures - Rock and Metal co-opted the symbol and moved it into mass consumed public property by selling their skull based mascots (in the case of Metal, indicative of adolescent boys fantasies) on posters, album covers, flags, tee-shirts and buttons.¹⁹ These two subcultures attract a predominantly suburban fan base with a need for conformity within their groups and the disposable income to buy into the symbolism. With the exception of the Goths and their romantic dark side, it is interesting to note that the subcultures appropriating the symbol are predominantly male.

**The Symbol Today**

Today the symbol has become ubiquitous, reiterated through all levels of fashion from mass to couture and all markets of both genders. Even pets are in on the trend. The skull and crossbones have come to symbolize *Piratitude*-living your life the way you want to, with no apologies. Never having to keep up with the Joneses. Not settling for the mundane. Having the courage to question authority. Living and loving passionately. Having a zest for life. Seeing life for all its possibilities. Launching into the unknown for sheer adventure. Being free and living freely.²⁰ “As Bartholomew Roberts said, contrasting the horrors of ‘honest service’ with the pleasure and ease and liberty and power (and, one might add, with the ‘honour’ and ‘justice’ as they understood it) of the pirate way of life: ‘Who’, he asked, ‘would not balance creditor on this side, when all the hazard that is run for it, at worst, is only a sour look or two at choking?’”²¹

*Treasure Island, Peter Pan,* and *The Pirates of Penzance* continue to appear in Popular Culture today. Along with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy, *Wife Swap* and

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¹⁹ http://www.kolahstudio.com/Underground/?p+174
²¹ Black, p.25
the brand new CBS series *Pirate Master* based on *Survivor* through popular culture we continue to romanticize and sanitize pirates into an endearing archetype.

**The Future**

As of February 25, 2007 The (London) Sunday Times Style supplement has proclaimed the skeleton motif as “Going Down”, however, Victoria’s Secret and Delia’s catalogs are featuring skull and crossbones swimwear for Summer 2007 while Alloy shows the theme on a variety of tops. Oriental Traders catalog consistently devotes several full pages to the popular adult and kid Pirate merchandise theme. A recent tour of shops in Philadelphia (May 2007) shows that pirate symbolism is still strong across the fashion apparel and accessory markets particularly in the junior category.

While the fashion frenzy is likely on the wane, Jolly Roger will never die. The June 6-12, 2007 edition of the Philadelphia Weekly reports the motif trending up in hip-hop fashion. Local teen Isaiah Mathis of American Rockstar says, “’I do the skull thing, cities, crazy letters, tie-dye art, rhinestones, chains.’ … the American Rockstar crew is part of a larger ‘rockstar’ trend sweeping across the country, evidenced by hip-hop culture expanding into and borrowing from rock music, art and fashion. Harlem rapper Jim Jones of the Dipset crew brought a rock ’n’ roll aesthetic to hip-hop fashion about a year ago with his characteristic skull pendants and belt buckles, studded bracelets and metal wallet chains.

But the rock influence didn’t surface in rap music until “Party Like a Rockstar” by the Atlanta-based Shop Boyz hit radio in April. (By May the rockstar anthem was the No. 1 ringtone in the country, although the Shop Boyz’s debut album Rockstar Mentality
doesn’t even hit stores until June 19.) Now bandanna-wearing skulls with crossbones are popping up all over hip-hop clothing, accessories, music videos and party fliers.”

Youth subcultures continue to keep the trend alive until mainstream fashion craves Jolly Roger once again.

**Bibliography**

**Books:**


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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jolly_Roger

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skull_and_Crossbones

The Skull and the two human thigh bones crossed are in some instances ascribed the astrological rulership of the first zodiacal sign
Aries and the 9th sign Sagittarius(17), both positive, Fire signs, the former cardinal - more dominant, while the latter is mutable -
passive. Whatever the case, a wealth of meaning encapsulated by the Skull and Crossbones/Deaths Head, and what's more, this is
just the briefest of outlines. Notes. 1. Micheal Baigent, Richard Leigh "The Temple and the Lodgeâ€ 1996 and Christopher Knight,
Leigh, 1996; p 68-9 5. Ibid, p 24-35 6. Rosslyn Chapel, built circa 1440-80, is an elaborately decorated "chapelâ€™ not far. From
pirates to poison bottles, the symbol depicting a human skull above two crossed bones is commonly associated with danger and death.
Hereâ€™s a look at the history and significance of the macabre symbol, and how it has been used by different cultures and
organizations to represent various ideals. History of Skull and Crossbones. We tend to associate the skull and crossbones with pirates,
but the symbol has a surprising origin. It began with the Christian military order â€“ the Knights Templars. The Knights Templar. The
Knights Templar was a Christian military order that carried out important m The Skull and Crossbones "There is a way that seems right
to a man, but in the end it leads to death.â€ Proverbs 16:25. Recently the skull and crossbones symbol has caught my attention.Â
The image of the skull and crossbones has a long tradition throughout the world, and has come to be synonymous with death.
Originally a warning left at the entrance to graveyards, the image was adopted by many groups over the years to strike fear into their
enemies or to symbolize an organization. Famously adopted by pirates, it has been used by military factions, secret societies and to
warn people against poisons. Some speculate deeper and associate its meaning to occult spiritual power rooted in ancient traditions
as sited by journalist Richard Cassaro A skull and crossbones is a symbol consisting of a human skull and two long bones crossed
together under or behind the skull. The design originates in the Late Middle Ages as a symbol of death and especially as a memento
mori on tombstones. In modern contexts, it is generally used as a hazard symbol that warns of danger, usually in regard to poisonous
substances, such as deadly chemicals. The skull and bones are often used in military insignia, such as the coats of arms of regiments.
The Skull and Crossbones symbol, as popular as it is, is also one of the most ambiguous of all symbols when it comes to its history. The
symbols most commonly associated with the Jolly Roger, a flag emblazoned with a skull and crossbones that pirates would use to
identify their ships. The symbol's origin, however, is an unsolved mystery that leads historians back two thousand years. Ancient History:
The symbolism of the skull and crossbones has its traces in the ancient era. It was first seen on on the tomb of Tutankhamun in Ancient
Egypt, with the cross-diagonal layout of judgement and pity f