

Masonic Symbolism – A Brief Look At Past & Present

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To begin with, what is symbolism ? why symbols ? To try and answer that we need to go back to a period around five thousand years ago.... to the time of the ancient Egyptians, the Sumerians and Mesopotamians and Persians.

These ancient people used Cuneiform writings which were a series of drawings or symbols to illustrate to the people what they were trying to convey, (rather like using Power Point from a computer nowadays) in a manner which would be clear to the non-scholars, the ordinary man or woman of the village or town.... because these ordinary people, as in later years of the middle ages or dark ages, had no conception of words, they could not read or write nor were they expected to, that was the gift of monks, priests, scholars and the rich, these were the only ones who would get an education of any kind based on the written word.

By the way, the middle ages were known as the dark ages for the very reason that in between the time of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance period, man in general had lost a lot of written history, scrolls, books and other records due to the fact that the victors of the many, many wars, battles and skirmishes, would carry off and burn or destroy all the important items belonging to the other side, as happened with King Solomon's temple, first pillaged by the Egyptian King Shishiak, then destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, so the average person of those times was illiterate, usually through no fault of their own making.

If you look in a dictionary, you will find an "emblem" described as a symbol, or "symbol" as an emblem, but usually typifying a particular concept or meaning of an item by means of a metaphor or allegory. It is a basic form of communication, for as we see alphabetic letters displayed in groups, they do not mean anything if we can't read, but having the forms and orders of those letters taught to us, we are able to decipher a meaning.

So it is that we have symbols which have a meaning explained by the removal of the veils of allegory, that is to say, taking the illustration and breaking it down into words that can be understood and absorbed, we hope, by the candidate or junior Mason, for each

degree, or part of that degree, as is the case in particular with the explanations of the tracing boards.

Not that it stops there, nor should it we should all be striving to learn and understand more about our order and the meaning of what we do remember the bit about "a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge"?

Symbols were used as a substitute for the written word and in preference to the usual "word of mouth" which had for generations been the accepted method of passing on knowledge, but all too often had led to misunderstandings and corruption of the original intended message, you only have to think of "Chinese Whispers" to get the idea, it also goes some way to explain the differences which grew up over time in some Masonic rituals, when it was the practice of some of the senior Lodge members and the D.C. to pass on what they considered the "correct" way of doing things in their own Lodge, without too much reference to the written version. (I am sure some of you brethren have your own experiences of this!) So the use of symbols was and still is, to some extent, an educational tool and is present in our Freemasonry of today.

We know that earlier Masons would draw out a tracing board for a meeting, it could be with chalks on a floor, or daubed with crude inks on a cloth or piece of wood, even scratched into a hard clay or earthen floor, and sometimes there were other marks chiselled into stone sometimes with a familiar Masonic symbol, sometimes with a peculiar mark which was the unique identity of an individual stonemason, a workman from the quarries..... those of you here who are Mark Master Masons understand the significance of this, for those gathered here who are not Mark Masons ... then it's about time you were, ask one of your brethren to tell you more and then propose you. That's the end of the advert, I will continue with the subject of symbols in use by Masons as we know them nowadays.

That has not always been the case though.... historic evidence has it that symbolism was not introduced into Freemasonry until an explanation of the symbols was written by William Calcott in 1769, the writings of Knoop & Jones state that; [quote] "It was almost certainly not until the second half of the 18th century that Freemasonry had been so modified that it could justly be considered a peculiar system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols"

So before this time, the working tools etc. were merely thought of as ornaments of the Lodge, the Worshipful Master was presented with them but with no moralising or other accompanying explanation.

In this latter part of the 18th century, so many symbols had been adopted or introduced, that when the two rival Grand Lodges came together in 1813, it was decided that several had to be dropped from use on the grounds that they were unnecessary, or that their meanings were not fully understood.

Among those to be dropped were the Beehive,(representing industry & co-operation), broken column, (untimely death)..... the column now adopted in the UK and elsewhere to represent Masonic widows, the hour glass & scythe (life & time), a Lions paw, (strength), that incidentally ties in with early rituals of the third degree, when the murdered Hiram Abif is raised by a Master Mason with "the strong grip of the Lions paw". A pot of incense, (pure heart), pyramid, (meaning immortality) to mention a few.

Some of these symbols are still in use in the USA, most of which operate their Blue Lodges (Craft Lodges) under the old York Rite or Scottish Rite. If any of you brethren have visited Lodges in the USA, you may well have come across some or all of these illustrations and wondered at their significance. The earlier US Lodges used tracing boards much as we do now but these were largely discontinued with the exception of some who still work as the English constitution. You may also see some of these signs as well as pyramids, or the hills of Lebanon with the Cedar trees drawn on early Masonic aprons.

Whilst mentioning the pyramids, I am sure a lot of you are aware of the symbols on the Great Seal of the United States, which also appear on the reverse of the U.S. \$1 dollar bill. There has always been a popular conception that these symbols are inexorably linked with Freemasonry because of the many Freemasons involved in the establishment of the United States.

Those among you who remember my talk some years ago based on the establishment of Texas and the Masons at the Alamo, may recall my reference to the Freemasons forming the Government of Texas, but initially in the formation of the United States Senate itself, indeed George Washington was a Mason, and the declaration of Independence was in the most part put together by Masons.

The symbols I refer to on the Great Seal are a pyramid and an all-seeing eye, now while we do have evidence of both these being symbolic in the Craft, the way they came to be chosen for the Great Seal according to historic records was a joint decision by a committee, of which only one was a Mason, that was Benjamin Franklin, to accept a design by one Pierre Eugene de Simitiere and was a pyramid of thirteen unfinished steps and the eye of providence above..... the eye is surrounded by the words "Annuit Coeptis" or "He approves (our) undertakings" and "Novus Ordo Seclorum" meaning "New Order of the Ages" The steps represent the original thirteen States and the future growth of the USA and at the base the Roman numerals for 1776 which was of course the year of Independence. The overall meaning is supposed to represent that the eye, or God, favours the prosperity of the United States.

What of symbols themselves..? The all-seeing eye is one of the most ancient recognised symbols, in ancient Egypt it was the eye of Horus, son of the chief deity (and whose eye was plucked out by Seth) and can be seen in hieroglyphics from the days of the Pharaohs and King Tutankhamen as found in the Pyramids at Giza and the temples of Karnak at Luxor and at Dhashur and Philae. It also appears in many early paintings, sometimes in clouds or in a sun burst and often shown within a triangle, a recognised symbol of the Christian Trinity, but it is not restricted to the Christian faith. The eye in a triangle and sunburst together are easily seen just by looking behind me at the back of the Masters chair. In Buddhism it is referred to as the Eye of the World ...

It can even be found on other currency notes besides the dollar bill, the Estonian 50 krooni, and the Ukrainian 500 hryvnia bill to name two. In a lot of countries around the world, especially in the Mediterranean and the Far East, it is not unusual to see the eye painted on the bow of fishing boats or other trading vessels, the eye is normally considered to either be watching over the seamen or it is to ward off evil spirits in the water by looking directly at them.

The square and compasses which we are all so familiar with, "to square our actions and keep us within due bounds", let us take these separately ...

The square as used by operative Masons was to test the accuracy of the prepared stone, to prove that each side was square with the

others, to show that the stone was fit for purpose and could be used in some or other part of the building.

It is also an angle of ninety degrees, or the fourth part of a circle, the actual square has long been considered symbolically to be representative of a person who is straight, honest and trustworthy the Chinese considered this attribute as far back as 2500 BC.

In Freemasonry we are taught that the square is a symbol of morality, it is one of the great lights, also the emblem of the Worshipful Master. It is interesting to note that there is almost nothing in nature that is square, so most items that are absolutely square have to be man made, by use of stone, wood or metal and to serve a purpose to man.

The compasses were used by operative Masons to mark out the ground for the intended structure from a scale drawing and interpreted to the actual size required for the building works. With the limits of the points, the moral lesson is that we are kept within bounds of good and evil and we will be rewarded or punished as we have obeyed or disregarded Gods divine commands. By keeping within these bounds of passion & prejudices we learn self-discipline and ultimately self-respect.

One of the most frequently seen errors in our lodges is the failure of a Warden to raise or lower his column appropriately. Let an absent-minded Junior Warden forget to lower his column when the lodge is called from refreshment to labour, and frantic gestures from the brethren nearest or opposite, together with a few "tut-tuts" from the corner will soon remind him of his duty. Almost all brethren sitting in the lodge know the proper position of the Wardens' columns during opening and closing, or when called from labour to refreshment, and from refreshment to labour and will quickly gesture to a Warden if the emblem of his office is in the wrong position.

The Wardens column is his emblem or symbol of the position he holds, they are in turn the emblem representing in the case of the Junior Warden, the pillar Boaz, being the pillar of strength, and in the case of the Senior Warden, the pillar Jachin, representing establishment.

The columns remind the brethren that by their position they are under the authority of the Senior Warden when the lodge is working and under the Junior Warden when taking refreshment, but interestingly, the use of the columns, certainly in their miniature form as we now see them sitting on the pedestals, has only been the case since

around 1760. The raising and lowering of the columns is described in papers written between 1760 and 1762 already into the period known as Speculative Masonry, but it is unclear as to why they were being used in this way. A logical explanation was that there were more organised meeting rooms (usually in pubs !) and more permanent furniture was in use as opposed to just having a floorcloth with the various symbols drawn on it, so they could now use a scale model of the pillars and had somewhere to put them.

Another interesting fact that I came across in my research was that in some early lodges the Wardens had truncheons, not columns. An Irish lodge in the 18th century had a by-law reading: "there is to be silence at the first chap of the Master's halber, and likewise at the first stroke of each Trenchmen struck by the Senior and Junior Wardens." The Rev. (Dr.) George Oliver (1782-1867), a famed writer about Freemasonry, quotes an inventory of a lodge at Chester, in 1761, which includes "two truncheons for the Wardens." goodness knows what they were for, I can only guess to literally preserve order in the West or South by means of corporal punishment for any wayward brethren!

The carpet or chequered pavement that adorns the centre of the lodge floor is symbolic in more than one way. It is meant to represent the floor of King Solomon's Temple, the square pavement for the High Priest to walk on. The black and white squares are the divisions of dark and light, or night and day and are considered emblematic of the divide of good and evil. We should think of them representing our journey through life, that the black squares could represent those leading us into temptation or taking the wrong decisions, the white representing the good and the right way. On entering masonry, we are led from the darkness of ignorance into the enlightenment of knowledge and are shown by symbolic masonry how we can be made better men and rendered fit members of regularly organised society.

Finally brethren, to conclude this talk which I hope has not been too taxing on your attention spans, I ask you to look at the most important symbol ... the letter "G" situated in the centre of the room, and consider it to be emblematic of the Great Architect of the Universe, the Supreme Being of whatever faith, creed or following you have belief in..... may he have all of you in his keeping and care from this day forward and forever.

Brethren, I thank you.