

Keeping the Meaning Intact: The Preparation of Notes for the Display of Symbolic Artifacts

by Shawn Eyer

The very thing that makes Masonic and other fraternal artifacts attractive for a museum's audience is what represents the greatest challenge for the exhibit designer: How can we make these fascinating but cryptic displays meaningful to the generally uninitiated viewer? The fact is that for each fraternal article there may be several obstacles that the designer faces: the inherently private nature of the meaning of some artifacts, the different understandings of the symbolism that flourished at specific time periods, and the cultural divide that modern people feel when encountering traditional ideas and symbols.

The first obstacle is actually a deliberate one. These symbols were not meant to be fully understood outside of their context in initiatic societies. I say "fully," because in general each symbol will have a range of meanings which were not considered private. Often there is a substantial literature devoted to the interpretation of such symbolism. But it is probably incumbent upon any exhibit designer to acknowledge, somewhere in the tour notes, that it is not

possible to completely understand the symbols of these fraternal cultures from the outside. The mystery is really the draw, and acknowledging the mystery will reinforce the viewer's interest.

Closely connected to that mystery is the question of the origins of these societies, which are typically not fully understood. Non-academic sources (such as official pamphlets from the organizations themselves) tend to be little more than unqualified folk histories, but within the academy great progress has been made in the understanding of the history of some fraternal groups. The standard work on the ultimate beginnings of Freemasonry is David Stevenson's *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1690-1710* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), and the best summary of American Masonic history is Steven Bullock's *Revolutionary Brotherhood* (University of North Carolina Press). Rest assured that

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even after basing our historical notes on sound scholarship, we will find plenty of mystery left.

The next hurdle is where exhibits frequently tend to fall short. The symbolism of the displays should not be interpreted through the eyes of contemporary members, at least not uncritically so. Just as residency in modern Boston does not qualify one to interpret century-old Bostonian artifacts, mere membership in a fraternal organization is insufficient qualification to explain what a given symbol on an older artifact means. Even leadership positions in modern fraternities do not imply such qualification. The iconographical representations of the symbols have evolved over time, and there exists the danger that a modern interpreter might, in full confidence, assign anachronistic meanings to items that could never have been so interpreted in their day. Further, the oral and literary culture of fraternal groups changes over time. So even if a given symbol looks today exactly as it did two hundred years ago, it is highly likely that the way in which members speak of that symbol has changed.

The best way to avoid this pitfall is to rely mainly on published texts dating near the original provenance of the artifact. In terms of Masonic artifacts, several sources are easy to identify:

1. William Preston's *Illustrations of Masonry*. From the first edition in 1772, this has been the most influential book ever published on Masonic symbolism. It doesn't describe every symbol, but is excellent source material for contextualizing British artifacts from 1770 to 1820 and even later. A searchable electronic

version of the first nine editions is available on CD-ROM from Academy Electronic Publications Ltd. More symbolism is explained in Preston's unpublished lectures, now available in full in Colin Dyer's *William Preston and His Work* (Lewis Masonic, 1987). Although these were not published until recently, they were nearly as influential as his *Illustrations*.

2. An American version of Preston's *Illustrations* appeared in 1797, retitled *A Free-Mason's Monitor, or Illustrations of Masonry* and edited by Thomas Smith Webb.



White leather Blue Lodge apron with gold and blue trim and white apron ties. On the flap is the All-Seeing Eye. The face of the apron contains several masonic symbols including the square and compass, trowel, 47th Problem of Euclid, hourglass, beehive, three steps, anchor and ark. Mid-nineteenth century. Placed with Sarah Ann Lowery of Chattanooga for safe keeping during the Civil War. Passed on to Ruth H. Murdock. Henry Wilson Coil Library & Museum of Freemasonry.

3. Jeremy Ladd Cross' *True Masonic Chart, or Hieroglyphic Monitor*. Appearing in 1819 and remaining very popular until the end of the nineteenth century, Cross' *Monitor* is the quintessential American Masonic document of the epoch. Cross was a student of Webb, and his innovation was to add engravings of the various Masonic symbols to the lectures already provided by his predecessor. These engravings were highly influential and are largely responsible for the relative homogeneity of Masonic iconography after 1820, where greater variation was common before. Explanations from Webb's *Monitor* may be safely associated with the vast majority of American Masonic artifacts from the

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nineteenth century.

4. Albert G. Mackey's *Symbolism of Freemasonry*. Originally printed in 1869, Mackey's *Symbolism* represents a reexamination of Masonic iconography from the philosophical perspective of the late nineteenth century, including significant cross-cultural insights. This work was a standard resource well into the twentieth century, and artifacts from the late 1800s may be well illuminated by quotations from Mackey's text. A convenient modern edition with index and scholarly notes is available from Plumbstone books.

5. Oliver Day Street's *Symbolism of the Three Degrees*. Originally published in 1922, Street's text is the best example of the simplified approach that became popular in the twentieth century. Based strongly on the work of Albert Mackey and other great interpreters of the nineteenth century, Street's *Symbolism* is well-regarded for its accessible format. It is ideal source material for explaining artifacts created during the twentieth century.

Similar volumes exist for many other fraternal societies, such as the Odd Fellows and the Grange, though not so numerous. Ironically, while recent academic works are the best way to research historical questions, in terms of the symbolism and philosophy they tend to be quite superficial. So when it comes to the philosophical side, stick closely to what the initiates themselves had to say.

Finally, the last problem: bridging the cultural divide. Many of the relics of the fraternal societies refer to general icons of Western culture, the

recognition of which is in decline. For example, an image of an older man standing with a drawn blade over a bound youth might be instantaneously recognizable as a representation of the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. But a significant and growing segment of the population today is not familiar with this story. To avoid miscommunication, a short summary of the story's importance might be required. The cultural core which the fraternal societies took for granted is no longer as universal in today's world. While full context can never be fully restored, one might work to reduce the purely "hieroglyphical" nature of an encounter with these symbols, and provide the viewer with a meaningful and authentic glimpse into the mysteries of these fascinating ceremonial societies.

Acknowledging the mystery, using interpretive language from the same era as a given piece, and linking the present to the past by addressing cultural shifts will do much to improve the display of these symbolic images that remain, as Preston put it 250 years ago, "a subject of contemplation... a theme inexhaustible, ever new, and always interesting."

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Cream and blue Masonic plate with various Masonic symbols including columns, gavel, star, clasped hands, eye, trowel, altar with compass and square, around rim Bienfaisance. Liberté. Egalité. Fraternité; Loge Humanité, Nevers, France. 1884. Henry Wilson Coil Library & Museum of Freemasonry