



MASONIC AND AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS

By Dr. Bing Johnson, 32°, KCCH

I never thought that I would ever have any interest in Masonic or American decorative art. It all started when I was asked to identify a Masonic symbol from a picture of the face of a two hundred year old clock. I thought that Masonic art was the use of the square and compasses and the letter "G" on rings, pins and lodge dinner plates. I had no idea that various Masonic symbols were on many common every day items used by the general public at one time in our history.

Understanding Masonic symbolism in American decorative arts involves a thorough understanding of Masonic history and symbolism, European and American history, as well as the various art forms.

Masonry's influence on America and its art forms is but another example of the Crafts profound influence on the social and political forces in our developing country as detailed by Steven Bullock in his book *REVOLUTIONARY BROTHERHOOD -Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840*.

Museums such as the Scottish Rite Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, MA and many other fine museums have large collections of Masonic and American decorative art. Perhaps that old box in the Lodge property room or your attic contains an example of this type of art and could be quite valuable.

The use of Masonic symbols in American decorative arts falls into two main periods. It was not until American Independence that Masonic symbolism became a significant decorative style. From 1775 to 1830 Masonic symbols were used on almost every type of object that was commonly decorated. The quality of the decoration on Masonic regalia in the period before 1830 is worthy of serious consideration in the field of American decorative arts. After 1830 the popularity of Masonic symbols abruptly declined as a result of the anti-Masonic movement. With the renewed popularity of Masonry in the second half of the 19th century, Masonic decoration returned to common use in a totally changed decorative style, characterized by a more Victorian and personal interpretation and quite different from the earlier period.

The explanation for the extensive use of Masonic symbols in American decorative arts is also found in the role that the symbolism and philosophy of Masonry came to play in establishing a distinctive American culture.

From about 1730 Masonry grew rapidly and played an important role in the social and political history of the United States. Masonry served as a unifying influence during the Revolutionary period. In fact, Masonic ties and patriotism were so socially entwined during this period that they merged in popular usage.

The ideals of equality, reason, and the brotherhood of Man, inherent in Masonry, had been translated into American independence and democracy. In searching for a style that would represent the newly formed United States, American craftsmen, many of whom were members of the Fraternity, turned to well known symbols that Masonry provided.

The moral tenants of Masonry, which its symbols represented, had encouraged the bid for American independence and continued to influence the establishment of a government based on principles of equality, natural rights, and democracy.

These symbols were derived from common objects, religion, and the intellectual environment of 17th and 18th century Europe in which Masonry developed. Masonic art developed stylistically into standard designs that were adopted as American decorative motifs and were used on everyday objects.

The ritual importance of these symbols of Masonry, apart from the decorative use, should be emphasized. The Fraternity is often described as “a matchless and almost perfect system of morality taught by symbols.” The use of common objects taken from everyday life as symbols of philosophical and moral ideas was an important aid to the educational aims of Masonry.

Early Masonry was steeped in the ideals of the Enlightenment, a period of great intellectual activity in the cause of general education as a means to freedom from prejudice and social injustice. The unifying characteristics of Enlightenment thought was a faith in the power to reason. The Enlightenment qualities of Truth, Beauty, Nature and Reason expressed in architectural and mathematical principles, were represented by examples of Stonemasonry.

Architecture was an important source of Masonic symbolism. Two prominent architects of the 17th century, Indigo Jones and Sir Christopher Wren, were reputed to be Masons. Much of the architectural symbolism of Masonry is also concerned with the building of King Solomon’s Temple. The classical orders of architecture, Ionic, Doric and Corinthian are symbols for the Masonic attributes of Wisdom, Strength and Beauty.

The development of symbols and philosophy of Masonry was also influenced by the 17th century discoveries of scientists like Sir Isaac Newton and John Tehophilus Desuaguliers.

The importance of science, especially geometry and the letter “G” in the symbolism of Masonry, dates from the mid 18th century and reflects this fascination with science. By the 18th century, the widespread interest in science had resulted in the popularization of scientific and mathematical terminology into everyday speech.

Heraldry was another source for the use of symbols. The compasses, an important symbol in Masonry, appeared on the arms of the Mason’s Company of London in 1472 and other building trade guilds.

Masonic symbols were often used in armorial arrangements through the 18th and 19th century as designs on ceramics, Masonic jewels and other American decorative arts.

The practice of decorative aprons began in the last third of the 18th century. Aprons were hand painted or embroidered with unique designs usually by family members or professional artists.

The art of the engraver came to play an important role in the development of more standardized Masonic symbols. Engraving on wood or metal plates was important in the 18th and 19th centuries as it was the only method of illustrating books and prints. By providing inexpensive multiple copies, engravings also helped promote the dissemination of information and the development of styles.

Handkerchiefs printed with copperplate engravings that included patriotic and historical subjects

undoubtedly played a part in establishing the designs for Masonic symbols.

Transfer printing made possible the transfer of engraved designs onto ceramics. English potters made a practice of using patterns for Americans that reflected the development of a distinctive American taste and style for Masonic decoration.

Masonic jewels are important examples of the work of American silversmiths and also contributed to the development of Masonic symbols. The first mention of uniform regalia appears in the records of the Grand Lodge of England in 1727. During his term as Grand Master of Massachusetts from 1794 to 1797, Paul Revere made several sets of officer's jewels for newly chartered lodges. One set, made for Washington Lodge in 1796, is still owned by the Lodge with the original bill of sale for \$12.

During the period from 1780 to 1820 it was customary for Masons to have personal jewels made. The fact that certain arrangements of symbols seems to occur in American jewels suggests that a certain amount of unofficial standardization was beginning.

A uniform American system of symbolism was first published by Jeremy Cross in his "Masonic Chart" in 1819. Cross made an important contribution to Masonic symbolism by including illustrations which he hoped would correct inaccuracies in the ritual he had observed during his tours as a Masonic lecturer.

A close relationship exists between the development of patriotic symbols and the use of Masonic symbols in American decorative arts. In some cases, Masonic symbols, were considered emblems of patriotism.

Following the pattern set by Masonry, American artists and craftsmen were able to develop an art style using patriotic symbols to teach patriotism and virtues for a new American society, much as Masonry taught its moral system.

Imported objects from England, France, Germany, China and Japan were gradually replaced with American made objects.

The number of American objects with Masonic decoration is tangible evidence of the important role that Masonry has played in American life.

Symbols used in American decorative arts reflected both the popularity of the Fraternity and the current style of the periods in which they appear. Masonic symbols were displayed on the popular forms of the day.

In the period 1775 to 1830, Masonic symbolism was used on almost every type of decorated object used in America. Even simple items like butter prints. Decoration on American objects shows that Masonic symbols were directly integrated into American design and used in conjunction with patriotic symbols in the 18th and 19th centuries. Equally important is the fact that familiarity with masonry's use of symbols undoubtedly influenced the adoption of an American decorative style that utilized symbols to represent the ideals and aspirations of the newly formed United States.

The use of Masonic symbols reached the height of popularity between 1820 and 1830 and then ended abruptly largely because of anti-Masonic sentiments. Many lodges were forced to close. It took several

decades for Masonry to regain its popularity.

The post Civil War period was marked by many changes in American life, and decorative arts with Masonic symbols in the Victorian period reflect different values from those of an earlier period of the Craft's popularity

The Victorian penchant for giving symbols and literary interpretations to art may have been influenced by the teachings of Masonry. Nineteenth century American homes were furnished with items more concerned with moral, social and intellectual ideas rather than beauty or utility.

Many of the differences reflect the shift from individual craftsmen to mass production and the use of new technology.

During the Victorian period different symbols came into vogue and were used in different ways and began to reflect the sentimentality of the period. The use of Masonic symbolism as decoration was no longer a national style, but rather a personal expression of involvement with masonry on an individual level.

In the second half of the 19th century with the beginning of mass production fewer items with Masonic symbols were of a quality to be considered as decorative art. Most of the objects decorated with Masonic symbols were either for the personal use of individuals or for lodges.

During the period from 1775 to 1830, when Masonic symbolism and patriotic imagery merged, Masonic decoration can be considered as a national style that went beyond the exclusive use of Masonry.

Following the anti—Masonic period of the 1830's to 1850's Masonic symbols reflected a more religious, sentimental, and personal use of symbolism that exemplified the taste of the Victorian era.

After the decades of the anti—Masonic period, Masonic symbols returned to popularity in a style that reflected a more religious, sentimental and personal use of symbolism.

After 1900, Masonic symbolism no longer played a role in American decorative arts, although it continues to be used by Masonry.

Masonic symbolism as decoration represents an important chapter in the development of American taste and design. Regardless of whether Masonry shaped American taste or reflected current style, its presence in American culture is significant.

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