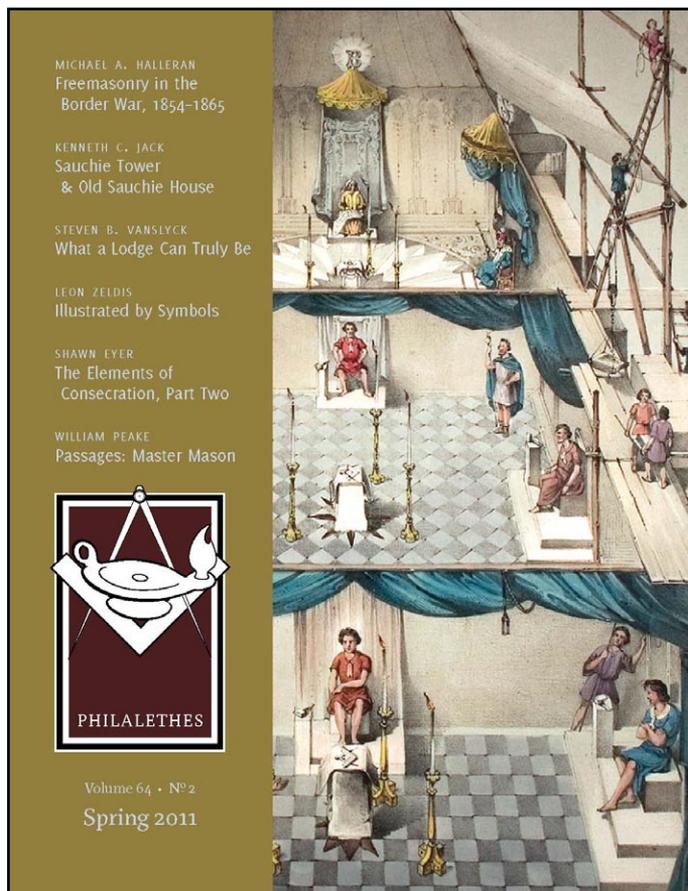


Sample Article from Volume 64 • Nº 2

LEON ZELDIS Illustrated by Symbols

Symbols, as the repositories of Freemasonry's meaning, are vitally important to any attempt to understand the meaning of the Craft. In this concise article, well-known Masonic author Leon Zeldis proposes a useful seven-tier taxonomy for the study of Masonic symbolism, encouraging us to "explore the rich trove of Masonic symbolism more thoroughly and deeply."



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Illustrated by Symbols

LEON ZELDIS PROPOSES A VALUABLE TAXONOMY
FOR THE STUDY OF MASONIC SYMBOLISM AND ITS MEANING

The most common definition of Freemasonry, explicitly stated in many workings around the globe, is that the Craft is “a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.” This nineteenth-century formula is really derived from the earlier definition of William Preston. In 1772, Preston defined Masonry as a “regular system of morality, conceived in a strain of interesting allegory, which unfolds its beauties to the candid and industrious enquirer.”¹

Both versions emphasize Freemasonry as a system of symbolism. Of course, we are not usually very systematic in our efforts to understand the symbols. Though it may seem to be a simple, even superfluous quest, this paper intends to sketch out some of the categories of that system, and to show the extent and variety of the symbolic experience in Freemasonry’s multi-layered world.

I shall begin by offering a tentative taxonomy of Masonic symbols, consisting of seven classifications: verbal, numerical, postural, sartorial, implemental, pictorial and ornamental.

Leon Zeldis FPS is a Past Master of La Fraternidad Lodge N° 62 and the Worshipful Master of Gavill 82 Lodge of Research in Tel Aviv, Israel. He is the author of *Masonic Symbols and Signposts* (Anchor Communications, 2003) and many other books and articles on Masonic subjects.

VERBAL SYMBOLS are the passwords, secret words and semester words (used in some jurisdictions). Most Masonic degrees require a password to prove having acquired it regularly. Examples are too numerous to list, but the origin of passwords is a fascinating subject in itself. Verbal symbols are mainly used as means of recognition, including expressions such as “meeting on the square” and similar ones that are used outside of the lodge.

Outside of the ritual workings themselves, there are some other Masonic expressions with symbolic meaning. One example is when we say “it is raining” to indicate the presence of non-Masons within earshot.

NUMERICAL SYMBOLS are expressed in a variety of ways. Acoustically, they are expressed in the three distinct knocks and the gavel-raps. Visually, we find them in the number of lights in a degree. Emblematically, they are present in the 3:4:5 triangle, the three theological virtues, the four cardinal virtues, the five points, the fifteen steps, etc. Consider also the symbolic ages given in the degrees of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite (from 3, 5 and 7 in the Craft lodge to the 33 of the 33°), the times of work (“what is the hour?”), and the number of officers.

POSTURAL SYMBOLS include the various positions of the body, legs and arms while standing to order, different according to the degree; position of

the hands making a grip or a sign, and the manner of walking within the lodge, as well as when entering it and departing from it. Circumambulation is an example of symbolic walking.

The study of Masonic signs would be a subcategory worthy of individual attention.

SARTORIAL SYMBOLS include the various aprons, sashes, collars, cuffs, gloves, ties, gowns, caps, and special costumes used in the representation of certain degrees, especially, but not exclusively, in the higher degrees of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

The officers' jewels, which may be classified as ornaments, properly belong to the sartorial family since their purpose is to be worn while the lodge is at work.

IMPLEMENTAL SYMBOLS include the three Great Lights of Freemasonry, the rough and polished ashlar, the Lewis, the working tools used in various degrees, staves (also called wands or rods), swords, mallets, the hoodwink, noose, cords. Also classified in this way would be the multitude of objects and devices present in the Lodge and/or used in the course of performing Masonic ceremonies, such as candlesticks and candles, the ladder in the 30th degree or the sprig of acacia in the 3rd.

A separate subcategory comprises the symbolic names of cutlery, tableware, food and drink in Masonic meals, as well as the firing glasses.

PICTORIAL SYMBOLS are, first and foremost, the Tracing Boards. Other pictorials are the pennants of the twelve tribes, lodge banners and pennants, flags, and painted aprons.

An important subcategory comprises the graphic designs in Masonic documents, diplomas, summons, and the symbols utilized in Masonic writing, such as the three dots in a triangle or tripunctial mark (∴),

the rectangle to signify the lodge (□), or the Latin acrostic **VITRIOL** that is used in some forms of the Chamber of Reflection.

A second subset comprises Masonic ciphers, from the simple one based on the 3x3 grid, to more elaborate ones used to protect rituals written in code.

ORNAMENTAL SYMBOLS refer to lodge decorations, such as a painted ceiling, curtains and wall hangings, illuminated sun and moon, the letter G, carpets, checkerboard pavement, columns, altar, knotted rope circling the lodge room, medals, pins, rings, painted plates and plaques.

Each and every one of the items listed in the above categories possesses a symbolic meaning, a moral or esoteric explanation. The Craft's symbolism is a system of great depth, and only appears simplistic when we view it superficially. But when we enquire candidly and industriously, the beauties of Freemasonry will unfold. As Preston taught:

Many of [Masonry's] illustrations to the confined genius may probably appear dull, trifling, and unimportant; but to the man of more enlarged faculties they will appear in the highest degree useful and interesting. To please the accomplished scholar and the ingenious artist, Masonry is wisely planned; and, in the investigation of its latent doctrines, the sage philosopher will experience delight and satisfaction.²

I hope this paper will serve as a stimulus and incentive for the reader to explore the rich trove of Masonic symbolism more thoroughly and deeply.

NOTES

1. William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry* (London: J. Williams, 1772), 60.
2. William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry*, 2nd Ed. (London: J. Wilkie, 1775), 75.

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