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THE SYMBOLISM OF COLOUR

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COLOURS IN FREEMASONRY.

Before considering the individual colours in detail it will be interesting to notice the part played by colours in Freemasonry.

The dark blue used in Grand Lodge regalia is derived from the blue of the Order of the Garter and the light blue for Master Masons is Cambridge blue adopted by way of contrast. The crimson in the Grand Stewards' regalia is derived from the Order of the Bath. The Scottish Grand Lodge took its green (thistle green) from the Order of the Thistle. The Grand Lodge of Ireland chose its light blue, contrast with the dark blue of the Grand Lodge of England.

In the Royal Arch Chapters of the eighteenth century the symbolic colours were scarlet mazarine blue, and light grey; but following the union of the two Grand Chapters, the scarlet robe of Z. represents imperial dignity, the purple robe of H., union and the blue robe of J., universal friendship and benevolence. Green has been adopted by a number of the Allied Degrees while green and red are the colours of the Royal Order of Scotland,

Colours have played so large a part in the customs of the Craft that the question arises whether ancient symbolism inspired the colours of Masonic clothing or whether the colours were adopted first and symbolism then

found for them. The general opinion nowadays is that the colours were chosen first – guided mainly by the colours associated with the noble Orders of the Garter and the Bath - and that the symbolic explanations were introduced afterwards.

PRIMARY COLOURS The three primary colours are red, yellow and blue and from these all other colours can be made. Next in importance are green and purple. Green is made by combining yellow and blue, while purple is made from red and blue. In addition to these there are black and white, but strictly speaking these are not colours.

White, the colour of light is seen analysed into its constituent colours in the rainbow where we find seven colours namely, violet, indigo, blue, green, orange and red. The process can be reversed by dividing a cardboard circle into seven equal sectors and painting one of them with each of the seven colours in the correct order. If this circle is revolved quickly on a centre pin all the colours will merge and white will be produced.

WHITE is the emblem of purity and innocence. It is the combination of the colours of the rainbow and so it would appear to symbolise unity, and it is used to represent innocence and joy. "He that overcometh shall be clothed in white raiment" (Revelations iii, 5). The New Testament refers to white garments as symbols of Christian aims and practice.

White is also the emblem of truth and hope. A Freemason's apron of white lambskin is the badge of innocence and the bond of friendship. It is a symbol of love, innocence and faith which leads to purity, peace and perfection.

Black symbolises evil, loss, despair and death. Strictly speaking it is not a colour at all, but rather the absence of colour. Black is the absence of light as black objects absorb all light and reflect none.

Black represents the most base yet complex element. Black is to us a sign of mourning. It is the most depressing of all colours, physically and mentally. It is the symbol of wickedness'. Thus we get the blackmailer, the black of the judge (before capital punishment was abolished).

Black symbolises evil. It refers to loss, despair and death. In heraldry black signifies prudence and wisdom.

RED Universally red is the emblem of faith, fortitude, divine love, magnanimity and suggests blood and martyrdom. The Bible refers to both scarlet and crimson as liturgical colours. In Freemasonry it is an emblem of imperial dignity and has been chosen to distinguish the robe of the First Principal in the Royal Arch. It indicates fervency and zeal.

Red is the colour of self-sacrifice and suffering for others and its highest symbolism is shown in the red Cross of the Crusaders. When the colour is considered along with the figure of a rose, it is the emblem of love and devotion. In some churches a red lamp is always kept burning as a sign of the deep sacrificial love of God.

Red is the lowest colour in the spectrum. It denotes life, action, cheerfulness, courage and energy. Red is the most defined colour. It symbolises fire, courage, power and happiness.

YELLOW is associated with the sun's rays and with gold, corn and oil. As yellow is the colour of gold and gold is the king of metals, yellow is used symbolically to represent the Deity, e.g. the golden eagle, the golden calf etc. The halo of saints is yellow, and we refer to the streets of Paradise being paved with gold, and also to the golden gates of Heaven. The ancient Irish nobility wore robes of yellow or saffron as a mark of their rank, whilst in China, yellow is a royal colour and the privilege of wearing it is jealously guarded. (This statement was probably made before the advent of Chairman Mao.) In India, yellow is the marriage colour and the bride stains her hands a yellow as a sign of happiness and unity. To the ancients yellow was considered the highest and most exalted colour. Yellow is positive and represents the mental side of man; unity, wisdom, knowledge and gladness. It also alludes to calm and peace.

BLUE represents truth, honour and friendship. It is the colour of the heavens symbolising the abode of God. On several occasions Moses was

commanded to wear blue. "Speak unto the children of Israel and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garment throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue. . . that ye may remember, and do all my Commandments and be holy unto your God." (Numbers XV. 38.)

In Freemasonry, which professes truth, honour and brotherly love, this ribband of blue is used on the borders of regalia symbolically to remind us that truth and virtue are to be prized above rank and fortune. Blue in its highest form symbolises truth, fidelity, friendship and benevolence.

PURPLE is a combination of Red (positive) and Blue (negative) and can be of many shades. It therefore takes on the meaning of both - that is the red of love and self-sacrifice and the blue of truth, hence it is symbolic of wisdom and rulership based on sacrifice and honour. In the Cryptic Degrees the Thrice Illustrious Master wears a purple robe.

Purple is formed by the union of Red and Blue and has become associated with Imperial Rule and dignity, from its combination of power and love. In the Royal Arch it is the emblem of unity.

In churches, purple altar cloths, bookmarks etc. are used as a sign of mourning on Saints' days; martyrs and angels are often shown clad in purple. Violet is the colour referred to penitence.

GREEN is the almost universal colour of the leaves and growing shoots of all vegetation. In symbolism it refers to hope, progress, evolution and regeneration.

Green is an emblem of hope, faith, youth and inexperience (hence we speak of a greenhorn). In the use of traffic lights, green signifies safety as opposed to red for danger. Green is also regarded as the symbol of gladness and abundance and has been directly associated with the ideas of resurrection and immortality and even of victory. The acacia (the Masonic evergreen) has been suggested as a symbol of a moral life, of re-birth and also of immortality.

GREY refers to humility. It is composed of a mixture of black and white. Metaphorically some people see life in terms of black and white – completely evil or completely good. They do not recognise any grey in between, which might be debatable or the subject of compromise, or that anything might be partly good and partly bad.

BROWN is associated with durability, firmness, constancy and self abnegation. It is the colour of a large part of the earth on which we dwell.

The adoption of the colours dark blue and crimson by the Grand Lodge of England in 1731 and taken from the Orders of the Garter and the Bath respectively was probably due to the considerable influence which the nobility development of Grand Lodge in its early days. No information however is available as to whether the nobility themselves attached symbolism to these colours.

These colours were adopted by the Grand Lodge of England purely as marks of distinction and this was made clear in the resolution relating to their adoption. There was no suggestion of any colour symbolism being attached to them. The development of Colour symbolism has taken place in the Royal Arch rather than in the Craft.

The symbolism of colour - like symbolism generally - is largely a matter of individual opinion, and as a result the same characteristics have been attributed to different colours by different individuals.

In considering the interpretation of symbolism we necessarily have regard to what is generally accepted in the community and particularly in the Church. Thus, in colour symbolism we recognise for example black for mourning and white for weddings. In other countries different colours are allotted by custom to these events.

The late Brother L. R. R. Denny in a paper on Symbolism printed in the Transactions of the Masters' and Past Masters' Lodge, volume 8, in 1939 gave a number of examples of symbolism accepted by the general public. He mentioned the Anchor for hope and security; Scales for justice; the Sword,

war; the Olive Branch, peace; the Poppy for sleep and death; and the Pomegranate for love. Similarly, we have the lion for courage, the lamb for innocence and the cross for sacrifice.

Much nonsense has been written on the subject of Masonic symbolism but in guiding our footsteps through this rather contentious subject we have to consider certain well established facts and principles:

1. Symbolism became a prominent feature of Freemasonry only in comparatively recent times. There is no evidence, for example, that the medieval Operative Masons moralised on their Working Tools.
2. Freemasonry has borrowed symbols from outside sources- for example from Hermeticism and Kabbalism, which in turn probably borrowed them from other sources. The Craft has also taken ancient symbols and given them a modern interpretation. The possession of ancient symbols by the Craft does not indicate ancient use in Freemasonry, but merely serves to give the Craft air of spurious antiquity which is not justified by its known history.
3. In 1813 at the Union of the two English Grand Lodges, a number of older symbols were deliberately discarded, such as the Anchor and Ark, the Beehive, the Sword and Naked Heart, the Scythe and Hour Glass, the Clasped Hands and the Pot of Incense. These are still in use in U.S.A.

It may be of interest to mention that the Grand Lodge of England in 1721 directed that Masters and Wardens of Lodges may wear their aprons lined with white silk and their respective jewels with plain white ribbon but of no other colour whatsoever.

It is stated in the Rawlinson Manuscript that yellow was to have been the colour worn by the Grand Master's Sword Bearer and an order for regalia included the item "One Apron turned with the deepest yellow for the Grand Master's Sword Bearer".

For a short time green was permitted in the case of the Country Stewards' Lodge No 540 which was constituted in 1789 and the members were allowed to wear a suitable Jewel suspended from a green ribbon, In 1796 the Brethren were given permission to line their aprons with green silk. The Lodge soon afterwards collapsed.

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