

Depictions of Freemasonry in Renaissance Art (?)

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AS TFTEM readers would know full well the history of Freemasonry prior to the early 1700's is characterised by scattered pieces of "evidence" and, consequently, much speculation. We find hints, references and allusions to proto-Freemasonry in diaries, letters, poems, local histories and official statutes. We can also find much of the symbolism of latter day Freemasonry in the illustrations and drawings of scholars, and hermetic-chemists of the 1500 and 1600's, such as Dr Robert Fludd, Athanasius Kircher and Dr John Dee.

However finding such obvious references to early proto-Freemasonry, or its symbols, in artworks and paintings of the 1500 and 1600's is not so easy. This is especially so given that the meaning and intent of a particular painting was often obscured by deliberate layers of imagery and symbolism. Symbolism that needed to be interpreted in order to fully understand the artists intended meaning and often knowledge of the ancient gods and biblical texts was required to decode them.



One example of such a painting, and there are many, that has possible allusions to proto-Freemasonry is Hieronymus Bosch's "The Wayfarer". (Bosch was born in the Netherlands in 1450 and died in 1516 – he painted the Wayfarer in 1510). Masonic author J.J. Robinson in his book "A Pilgrim's Path" argues that this particular painting is full of references to early proto-Freemasonry. Perhaps our late Bro Robinson is correct and Bosch was depicting the travelling journeyman mason.

The central figure, The Wayfarer, is glancing back upon a scene of drunkard debauchery, whose inhabitants are considered no better perhaps than the pigs at the swill depicted in the foreground. The Wayfarer is obviously either turning his back on such a life-style, or has no time for such depravity and merely glances back whilst walking by.

As to the Wayfarer, Freemasons will immediately notice the bare knee and slip-shod foot and, although the Wayfarer is hooded, he has a superfluous hat in his hand that has a distinct circle upon it with a plumb-bob attached to the centre. Directly above our Wayfarer is an owl – an ancient emblem for wisdom, whilst the gate on the Wayfarer's path has a distinct elongated builder's square, common for the era, incorporated into its structure. Maybe Bosch is depicting the skilled and properly prepared journeyman mason displaying his high moral standards as he remains on the path rectitude and fidelity.

"It is possible, of course, that the Masonic symbols in this painting are all merely coincidences. If so, this is the most incredible collection of Masonic coincidences that we may ever expect to see assembled in a single work." (ref. J.J. Robinson – *A Pilgrim's Path*, pp. 117-118). Consider 2 further interpretations at: -

<http://www.esotericbosch.com/wayfarer/wayfarer.htm>

<http://arts.tau.ac.il/departments/images/stories/journals/arhistory/Assaph6/10leider.pdf>