

Masonic Colours and Their Symbolism

W.Bro. Kenneth J. Tuckwood

District Chairman of Masonic Education 2002-2003 UGLE

Colours have so large a place in the customs of the craft that inevitably the question arises "did ancient symbolism inspire the colors of Masonry or were they chosen and the symbolism then found to fit them?" Many years ago a writer who went deeply into the question came to the conclusion that the English Grand Lodge, in choosing the colors of its clothing, was guided mainly by the colors associated with the Noble Orders of the Garter and the Bath. This idea is more or less confirmed by the late Henry Sadler, an authority universally respected, who said "Having looked at the matter from every conceivable point of view, I have failed to think of a more favourable explanation." We must conclude, therefore that Freemasonry's colors were no more derived from ancient symbolism than were the colors of the liturgical vestments of the Christian Church derived from those of the Jewish Priests.

Blue

It has been suggested by Bernard Jones that the deep blue color, Oxford Blue, was borrowed from the ribbon of the Most Noble Order of the Garter. When the garter was instituted by Edward III about 1348 and reconstituted in 1805 and 1831, it was a light blue. However after the ascension of George I in 1714, this light blue was changed to the present deep blue to distinguish the color of the Order from that which the Stuarts in banishment on the continent had conferred on their adherents. Our constitution refers to this color as garter blue. The light blue of private lodge clothing was deliberately chosen to contrast with and mark the difference from the deep blue of Grand Lodge clothing. It is also referred to as azure blue, the cerulean blue or, as in our Constitution, as sky blue. Universally, blue denotes immortality, eternity, chastity, and fidelity. Pale or light blue in particular represents prudence and goodness. In Freemasonry, blue is the emblem of universal brotherhood and friendship and instructs us that in the mind of a Mason those virtues should be as extensive as the blue arch of Heaven itself. Albert MacKay confirms this adding that while not only is blue the color of the vault of heaven, which embraces and covers the globe, we are reminded that in the breast of every brother, brotherly love and friendship should be equally as extensive. Among the religious institutions of the ancient Jews blue was a chief religious color - the High Priest had a blue robe, as well as a blue ribbon for his breastplate and blue for the plate of the miter. One of the veils of the tabernacle was of a blue color, which represented air. The Hebrew word used on these occasions to designate the color blue or purple blue is known as tekelet, and this word seems to have a singular reference to the symbolic character of the color, for it is derived from a root signifying perfection. MacKay adds that it is well known that, among the ancients' that initiation into the mysteries and perfection were synonymous terms. The appropriate color of the greatest of all the systems of initiation may well be designated by a word, which also signifies perfection. It is said that in the ancient days, the most solemn oaths were sworn on blue altars.

The Egyptians esteemed blue as a sacred color and the body of Amun, the principal god of their theology, was painted light blue to imitate his perfectly exalted and heavenly nature. The ancient Babylonians clothed their idols in blue, as we learn from the prophet Jeremiah (x,9). The Chinese, in their mystical philosophy, represented blue as the symbol of their deity because, being as they say compounded of black and red, this color is a fit representation of the obscure and the brilliant, the male and female or active and passive principles. The Hindus assert that their god, Vishnu was represented of

a celestial or sky blue, thus indicating that wisdom emanating from God was to be symbolized by this color. Among the Druids, blue represented truth.

The use of this color has led to the three degrees of Freemasonry being called the blue degrees or Blue Masonry, conferred in a Blue Lodge.

White

Conventionally, whatever it is technically, white is a color. In the Craft and throughout the world it is a natural emblem of purity, truth, innocence, and hope. It is first met in Freemasonry in the white lambskin apron, which is the badge of innocence and bond of friendship. It can also be symbolic of regeneration or resurrection. Biblical references in support of this are many.

Violet & Purple

These are closely related to Blue. The Bible has many references to purple, which symbolizes regal apparel and richness. The New Testament speaks of "a seller of purple" (Acts xvi,14). The Book of Numbers says, "they shall spread a purple cloth on the altar" (iv 13). The Book of Judges refers to the purple raiment of the Kings of Midian (viii, 26). At the crucifixion of Christ the soldiers of Pilate, as an act of derision, "planted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head and they put on him a purple robe" (John xix,2). Universally violet and purple are the emblems of regal grief and death, but in addition violet conveys the idea of penitence, and purple the ideas of royalty, justice and temperance. In Freemasonry, but on a purely technical ground, purple has been called the emblem of union, because the union of blue and red forms it.

Red, Crimson, & Scarlet

In Freemasonry, the one color crimson represents all these three colors. Universally, red is the emblem of faith, fortitude, divine love, magnanimity, and in its suggestion of blood, martyrdom. The Bible refers to both scarlet and crimson as liturgical colors. In Freemasonry scarlet is the emblem of high dignity, fervency and zeal, particularly in the Royal Arch.

Green

Green has always been regarded as the symbol of gladness and abundance and has been directly associated with ideas of resurrection and immortality, even of victory. In the allied degrees it is a symbol of the moral resurrection of the candidate, teaching him that being dead to vice he should hope to revive in virtue. It is employed as a symbol of immortal truth which, like the Bay tree, will ever flourish in immortal green. The idea of the unchanging immortality of that which is divine and true was always connected with the color green. Among the Egyptians, the god Phtha, the active spirit, the creator and regenerator of the world, the goddess Pascht, the Divine preserver and Thoth, the instructor of men in the sacred doctrines of truth were all painted in the hieroglyphic system with green flesh. To them it was also the symbol of hope. Green was, with the Druids, a symbol of hope and the virtue of hope with a Freemason illustrates the hope of immortality. In all the Ancient Mysteries, this idea was carried out, and green symbolized the birth of the world, the moral creation of the initiate. If we apply this to the evergreen, the acacia is the emblematic symbol of a new creation of the body and a moral and physical resurrection. The Bible has but few references to it as a liturgical color. In the Book of Esther, it mentions the green hangings in the King's palace, but uses green to indicate the products of the good earth, in this sense associated with plenty, the opposite of famine. Green has been adopted by a number

of allied Masonic degrees whose teaching is closely associated with the immortality of divine truth. In the ancient mysteries, green stood for the moral birth or rebirth of the Initiate. The acacia or Masonic evergreen has been suggested as a symbol of a moral life of rebirth and also of immortality and is so used in the Masonic Memorial Service to a departed brother who has gone to the Grand Lodge Above. The Grand Lodge of Scotland has adopted thistle green as its emblematic color and a green ribbon or collar was part of the regalia of the Country Steward's Lodge, originally No. 540, which had a short life and was constituted in 1789 for the particular association of stewards charged with making arrangements for an annual festival that met out of London. Grand Lodge permitted the members to wear a special jewel suspended from a green ribbon or collar, the color having been chosen apparently because of its suggestion of the countryside. The members were also given the right to wear a green apron, a privilege withdrawn about 1797, although that of wearing the green collar was retained.

Yellow, Gold, & Silver

Yellow is used in Freemasonry only as gold, the symbol of the sun and therefore of constancy, while silver represents the moon. Universally, yellow has been held to represent jealousy, incontinence and treachery. But in heraldry whereas in masonry, yellow represents gold - its significance being entirely reversed.

Black

Different writers have different views on this color. According to Albert Mackey, black in the Masonic Ritual is constantly the sign of grief. It is perfectly consistent with its use in the world where, from remote antiquity, black has been adopted as the garment of mourning. In Freemasonry, this color is confined to but a few degrees, but everywhere has the single meaning of sorrow. Thus in the French rite, during a ceremony of raising in one of the degrees, the Lodge is clothed in black, strewn with the representation of tears as tokens of grief for the loss of a distinguished member of the fraternity. Coil says that the common acceptance of black as a symbol of sorrow or mourning is not applied in Craft ritualism, although popular regard for black crepe may be in evidence as Masonic symbols. He also makes reference to the use of the color in the French degrees and allied degrees of the Knights Templar and Scottish Rite. Bernard Jones goes a bit further in commenting on the allied degrees that black symbolizes not only grief but also silence and secrecy. In heraldry it has a different significance - that of prudence and wisdom - while grey symbolizes tribulation.