

The Apron Unknown

“An emblem of innocence and the badge of a mason; more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, more honorable than the Star and Garter, or any other order that can be conferred upon you at this or any future period, by any King, Prince, Potentate, or any other person, except he be a Mason.”

In these few words Freemasonry expresses the honor she pays to this symbol of the Ancient Craft.

The Order of the Golden Fleece was founded by Philip, Duke of Burgundy, in 1429.

The Roman Eagle was Rome's symbol and ensign of power and might a hundred years before Christ.

The Order of the Star was created by John II of France in the middle of the Fourteenth Century.

The Order of the Garter was founded by Edward III of England in 1349 for himself and twenty-five Knights of the Garter.

That the Masonic Apron is more ancient than these is a provable fact. In averring that it is more honorable, the premise “when worthily worn” is understood. The Apron is “more honorable than the Star and Garter” when all that it teaches is exemplified in the life of the wearer.

Essentially the Masonic Apron is the badge of honorable labor. The right to wear it is given only to tried and tested men. Much has been written on these meanings of the symbol, but more has been devoted to trying to read into its modern shape and size – wholly fortuitous and an accident of convenience – a so-called “higher symbolism” which no matter how beautiful it may be, has no real connection with its “Masonic” significance.

So many well-intentioned brethren read into the Masonic Apron meanings invented out of whole cloth, that any attempt to put in a few words the essential facts about this familiar symbol of the Fraternity, either by what is said or left unsaid, is certain to meet with some opposition!

It is not possible to “prove” that George Washington did “not” throw a silver coin across the Rappahannock, or that he did “not” cut down a cherry tree with his little hatchet. Yet historians believe both stories apocryphal.

It is not possible to “prove” that no intentional symbolism was intended when the present square or oblong shape of the Masonic Apron was adopted (within the last hundred and fifty years), nor that the conventionalized triangular flap in “not” an allusion to the Forty-Seventh Problem and the earliest symbol of Deity (triangle), nor that the combination of the four and three corners does not refer to the Pythagorean “perfect number” seven. But hard-headed historians, who accept nothing without evidence and think more of evidence than of inspirational discourses, do not believe our ancient brethren had in mind any such symbolism as many scientific writers have stated.

The view-point of the Masonic student is that enough real and ancient symbolism is in the apron, enough sanctity in its age, enough mystery in its descent, to make unnecessary any recourse to geometrical astronomical, astrological or other explanations for shape and angles which old gravings and documents plainly show to be a wholly modern conventionalizing of what in the builder’s art was a wholly utilitarian garment.

As Freemasons use it the apron is more than a mere descendant of a protecting garment of other clothing, just as Freemasons are more than descendants of the builders of the late Middle Ages. If we accept the Comancine theory (and no one has disproved it) we have a right to consider ourselves at least collaterally descended from the “Collegia” of ancient Rome. If we accept the evidence of sign and symbol, truth and doctrine, arcane and hidden mystery; Freemasonry is the modern repository of a hundred remains of as many ancient mysteries, religions and philosophies.

As the apron of all sorts, sizes and colors was an article of sacred investiture in many of these, so is it in ours. What is truly important is the apron itself; what is less important is its size and shape, its method of wearing. Material and color are symbolic, but a Freemasons may be – and has been many – “properly clothed” with a handkerchief tucked about his middle, and it is common practice to make presentation aprons, most elaborately designed and embellished, without using leather at all, let alone lambskin.

Mackey believed color and material to be of paramount importance, and inveighed as vigorously as his gentle spirit would permit against decorations, tassels, paintings, embroideries, etc. Most Grand Lodges follow the great authority as far as the Craft is concerned, but relax strict requirements as to size, shape, color and material for lodge officers and Grand Lodge officers. Even so meticulous a Grand Lodge as New Jersey, for instance, which prescribe size and shape and absence of decoration, does admit the deep purple edge for Grand Lodge officers.

It is a far cry from the “lambskin or white leather apron” of the Entered Apprentice, to such an eye-filling garget as is worn by the grand Master of Masons in Massachusetts – an apron so heavily encrusted with gold leaf, gold lace, gold thread, etc., that the garment must be worn on a

belt, carried flat in a case, weighs about ten pounds, and can be made successfully only by one firm and that abroad!

At least as many particular lodges cloth their officers in embroidered and decorated aprons, as those which do not. The Past Master's apron bearing a pair of compasses on the arc of a quadrant, may be found at all prices in any Masonic regalia catalogue. So if, as Mackey contended, only the plain white leather apron is truly correct, those who go contrary to his dictum have at least the respectability of numbers and long custom.

Universal Masonic experience proves the apron to be among the most important of those symbols which teach the Masonic doctrine. The Apprentice receives it through the Rite of Investiture during his first degree, when he is taught to wear it in a special manner. The brother appearing for his Fellowcraft Degree is clothed with it worn as an Apprentice; later he learns a new way to wear it. Finally, as a Master Mason, he learns how such Craftsmen should wear the "badge of a Mason."

That various Jurisdictions are at odds on what is here correct is less important than it seems. Many teach that the Master Mason should wear his apron with corner tucked up, as a symbol that he is the "Master," and does not need to use the tools of a Fellowcraft, but instead, directs the work. As many more teach that the Fellowcraft wears his apron with corner up, as a symbol that he is not yet a "Master," and therefore does not have a right to wear the apron full spread, as a Master Mason should! Into what is "really" correct this paper cannot go; Jeremy Cross, in earlier editions of his "True Masonic Chart" shows a picture of a Master Mason wearing his apron with the corner tucked up.

What is universal, and important, is that all three – Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Mason – do wear their aprons in different ways. All are Masons, hence wear the badge of a Mason; one has progressed further than another, and therefore wears his apron differently as a sign that he has learned more.

Incidentally, it may be noted that aprons seldom are, but always should be, worn on the outside of the coat, not hidden beneath it. Alas, comfort and convenience – and, in urban lodges, the evening dress of officers and some members – have led to the careless habit of wearing the apron not in full view, as a badge of honor and of service, but concealed, as if it were a matter of small moment. The use of the apron is very old – far older than as a garment to protect the clothing of the operative craftsmen, or to provide him with a convenient receptacle in which to keep his tools.

Girdles, or aprons, were part of the clothing of the Priests of Israel. Candidates for the mysteries of Mithras in Persia were invested with aprons. The ancient Japanese used aprons in religious worship. Oliver, noted Masonic scholar of the last century, no longer followed as a historian but venerated for his research and his Masonic industry, says of the apron:

“The apron appears to have been, in ancient times, an honorary badge of distinction. In the Jewish economy, none but the superior orders of the priesthood were permitted to adorn themselves with ornamented girdles, which were made of blue, purple and crimson; decorated with gold upon a ground of fine white linen; while the inferior priests wore only white. The Indian, the Persian, the Jewish, the Ethiopian and the Egyptian aprons, though equally superb, all bore a character distinct from each other. Some were plain white, others striped with blue, purple and crimson; some were of wrought gold, others adorned and decorated with superb tassels and fringes.

“In a word, though the “principal honor” of the apron may consist in its reference to innocence of conduct and purity of heart, yet it certainly appears through all ages to have been a most exalted badge of distinction. In primitive times it was rather an ecclesiastical than a civil decoration, although in some cases the apron was elevated to great superiority as a national trophy. The Royal Standard of Persia was originally “an apron” in form and dimensions. At this day, it is connected with ecclesiastical honors; for the chief dignitaries of the Christian church, wherever a legitimate establishment, with the necessary degrees of rank and subordination, is formed, are invested with aprons as a peculiar badge of distinction; which is a collateral proof of the fact that Freemasonry was originally incorporated with the various systems of Divine Worship used by every people in the ancient world. Freemasonry retains the symbol or shadow; it cannot have renounced the reality or substance.”

Mackey’s dictum about the color and the material of the Masonic apron, if as often honored in the breach as in the observance, bears rereading. The great Masonic scholar said:

The color of a Freemason’s apron should be pure unspotted white. This color has, in all ages and countries, been esteemed an emblem of innocence and purity. It was with this reference that a portion of the vestments of the Jewish priesthood was directed to be white. In the Ancient Mysteries the candidate was always clothed in white. “The priests of the Romans,” says Festus, “were accustomed to wear white garments when they sacrificed.” In the Scandinavian Rites it has been seen that the shield presented to the candidate was white. The Druids changed the color of the garment presented to their initiates with each degree; white, however, was the color appropriate to the last, or degree of perfection. And it was, according to their ritual, intended to teach the aspirant that none were admitted to the honor but such as were cleansed from all impurities both of body and mind.

“In the early ages of the Christian church a white garment was always placed upon the catechumen who had been newly baptized, to denote that he had been cleansed from his former sins, and was henceforth to lead a life of purity. Hence, it was presented to him with this solemn charge:

“Receive the white and undefiled garment, and produce it unspotted before the tribunal of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that you may obtain eternal life.”

“From these instances we learn that white apparel was anciently used as an emblem of purity, and for this reason the color has been preserved in the apron of the Freemason.

“A Freemason’s apron must be made of Lambskin. No other substance, such as linen, silk or satin could be substituted without entirely destroying the emblematical character of the apron, for the material of the Freemason’s apron constitutes one of the most important symbols of his profession. The lamb has always been considered as an appropriate emblem of innocence. Hence, we are taught, in the ritual of the First Degree, that “by the lambskin, the Mason is reminded of the purity of life and rectitude of conduct which is so essentially necessary to his gaining admission into the Celestial Lodge above, where the Supreme Architect of the Universe forever presides.” Words grow and change in meaning with the years; a familiar example is the word “profane” which Masons use in its ancient sense, meaning “one not initiated” or “one outside the Temple.” In common usage, profane means blasphemous. So has the word “innocence” changed in meaning. Originally it connoted “to do no hurt.” Now it means lack of knowledge of evil – as an innocent child; the presence of virginity – as an innocent girl; also, the state of being free from guilt of any act contrary to law, human or Divine.

“An Emblem of Innocence” is not, Masonically, “an emblem of ignorance.” Rather do we use the original meaning of the word, and make of the apron an emblem of one who does no injury to others. This symbolism is carried out both by the color and material; white has always been the color of purity, and the lamb has always been a symbol of harmlessness and gentleness. Haywood says:

“The innocence of a Mason is his gentleness, chivalrous determination to do no moral evil to any person, man or woman, or babe; his patient forbearance of the crudeness and ignorance of men, his charitable forgiveness of his brethren when they willfully or unconsciously do him evil; his dedication to a spiritual knighthood in behalf of the value and virtues of humanity by which alone man rises above the brutes and the world is carried forward on the upward way.”

The lambskin apron presented to the initiate during his entered Apprentice Degree should be for all his life a very precious possession; the outward and visible symbol of an inward and spiritual tie. Many, perhaps most, Masons leave their original aprons safely at home, and wear the cotton drill substitutes provided by many lodges for their members. But here again the outward and evident drill apron is but the symbol of the presentation lambskin symbol; the symbol kept safely against the day when, at long last, the members of a lodge can do no more for their brother but lay him away under its protecting and comforting folds.

Truly he has been a real Mason, in the best sense of that great word, who has worn his lambskin apron during his manhood “with pleasure to himself, and honor to the Fraternity.”

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