

# Enlightened Ideas, Renaissance Culture: Syncretism and Emblems in Eighteenth-Century's English Freemasonry

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## ABSTRACT

The eighteenth-century developed sophisticated readings of practices and ideas that were fermenting since the Renaissance: the fascination for architecture and its mysteries, Neoplatonism, and the development of a language based on symbols and allegories. Among the outcomes of the enlightenment is Modern Freemasonry, and as such, it is no different to the other phenomena, meaning that it was a long-fermented idea. The syncretism presented by Freemasonry was typical of its time. Among this syncretical thinking there was a subtle use of Emblems. Through the performance of ritual Freemasonry creates connections between symbols, allegories and moral philosophy spread by Enlightenment.

**Keywords:** Masonic enlightenment, Emblems, Emblemata, Masonic symbols, Masonic ritual, Renaissance Culture, English Freemasonry

## Ideas ilustradas, cultura renacentista: sincretismo y emblemas en la masonería inglesa del siglo XVIII

El siglo XVIII desarrolló lecturas sofisticadas de prácticas e ideas que fermentaban desde el Renacimiento: la fascinación por la arquitectura y sus misterios, el neoplatonismo y el desarrollo de un lenguaje basado en símbolos y alegorías. Entre los resultados de la Ilustración está la Francmasonería Moderna, y como tal, no es diferente a los otros fenómenos, lo que significa que fue una idea largamente fermentada. El sincretismo presentado por la masonería era propio de su época. Entre este pensamiento sincrético hubo un uso sutil de Emblemas. A través de la realización de rituales, la masonería crea conexiones entre símbolos, alegorías y filosofía moral difundida por la Ilustración.

**Palabras clave:** Iluminación masónica, Emblemas, Emblemata, Símbolos masónicos, Ritual masónico, Cultura renacentista, Masonería inglesa

## 启蒙思想与文艺复兴文化：十八世纪英国共济会的宗教融合与图案

十八世纪出现了一系列对文艺复兴以来不断发酵的实践与思想的复杂解读：例如对建筑及其奥秘的迷恋、新柏拉图主义，以及基于图案和寓言的语言发展。启蒙运动的成果之一是现代共济会，因此，它与其他现象没有什么不同，这意味着共济会是一个酝酿已久的想法。共济会提出的宗教融合 (syncretism) 则是当时的典型。在这种融合的思想中，有一种对图案的微妙使用。通过仪式的表现，共济会在启蒙运动传播的符号、寓言和道德哲学之间建立了联系。

关键词：共济会启蒙，图案，Emblemata，共济会图案，共济会仪式，文艺复兴文化，英国共济会

The eighteenth-century developed sophisticated readings of practices and ideas that were fermenting since the Renaissance: the fascination for architecture and its mysteries, Neoplatonism, and the development of a language based on symbols and allegories. Resembling any other historical period, the enlightenment and its products were constrained by their time, the apathy and excitement of synchronicity. It is a far-fetched, but contagious, idea to assume that such developments were intended or designed, that the men developing such traditions were “speaking to the future” in the expression used by Jules Michelet.

Among the outcomes of the enlightenment is Modern Freemasonry,

and as such, it is no different to the other phenomena, meaning that it was a long-fermented idea, that was developed overtime, and that also had no design.

Freemasonry is not the only thing that came anew in the eighteenth century, one of its most prominent features, was also put under a different light: syncretism. This element of society and philosophy regarded negatively before, was started to be seeing as a positive merge of knowledge (or beliefs) which would contribute to critical and free thinking. The first major change towards a positive attitude on syncretism comes in the entries associated to it in the *Encyclopédie*, such as *synchrétisme* and *éclectisme*.<sup>1</sup>

1 ‘Emblème’ in *L'Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisoné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers, par une Société de Gens de Lettres*, ed. by Diderot and D'Alembert, 5<sup>ème</sup> Tome (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, 1755), p.556.

The syncretism presented by Freemasonry was typical of its time. In it, was a huge claim of antiquity which was used to give the required respectability, a ritual framework which resembled the fashionable modes of sociability of the time, and also presented in a performative and esoteric way the moral teachings so widespread in England at that time.

Among this syncretical thinking there was a subtle use of Emblems. Subtle because they were not used as in the previous centuries, but diluted in a new and compelling way. The emblems were ensembles of a picture (drawing) and a poem conveying a moral and/or moralizing message. They were part of the *ut pictura poesis* (*as is painting, so is poetry*) tradition, meaning that the emblem was a parallel between poetry and painting, or, according to Dieter Sulzer, “a synthesising art”<sup>2</sup>

Emblems were popularized by the printing revolution through works called “Emblem Books” which became the primary form of erudite communication during the Early Modern period. The Emblems evolved from a literary relation between the meaning of the picture and the poem to a more independent characteristic of both. The correlation between poem and figure was regarded by some authors as essential, and any trace of independence from any of them seem as vulgarity.

The Emblems were part of a wider taste for allegories which were

not only present in the 16th and 17th centuries, but also became the common language for paintings and poetry. The art of Emblem making reposed on the interconnection between poetry and painting, however, it is a fair assessment to say that they were mostly constructed in opposition to each other. Plutarch reading of Simonides of Keos that “painting is dumb poetry, and poetry is speaking painting” used to resonate until the Renaissance. Leonardo da Vinci represented the beginning of a turn in this understanding since in his notebooks, published under the title *Tratatto della Pittura* (1632), advocates for the superiority of painting as being closer to nature, and a more accessible art form. However, the relation marked out by Plutarch was still used in the early modern period by Emblem writers and its critics as a critical formula.

The entry *emblème* of the French *Encyclopédie* demonstrates that by the year of publishing of the fifth volume, 1755, the concept of emblem was already simplified. From the literary and poetic discussions of the seventeenth century, now emblems were understood as “image or painting which, by representing some known story or symbol, accompanied by a word or a legend, leads us to the knowledge of another thing or a morality.”

Therefore, the relationship between images and moral teachings was not a singularity brought by Freemasonry, but rather a tradition that was re-

2 Peter M. Daly, *Emblem Theory: Recent German Contributions to the Characterization of the Emblem Genre*. By Wolfenbütteler Forschungen, Vol. 9 (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus-Thomson Organization Press, 1979), p.9.

habilitated by it. We may see in these practices the influence of the Emblem Culture which had a late life in England. The first English emblem book was published in 1586, a hundred years later, in 1686, its popularisation could be seen by the publication of a children's emblem book. For most researchers, engaged on the higher forms of that genre, the children's book signify the death of that convention.

A less peremptory approach can be made if we see the emblem culture not dying, but migrating. The same way in which emblem culture flourished from the taste for allegory inherited from the Middle Ages, the early modern period was seeing the growth of a living tradition. Especially in England, emblems may be defined by two types: one the 'moralising emblem', based on classic and humanist *topoi*, the rhetorical commonplaces from the Renaissance Culture; and the other the 'religious' or 'spiritual' emblem, based on the revival of the Christian meditation in the 17th century. These two types can be seen as having an influence on Freemasonry since its imagery has elements of both.

Regarding under an iconological approach, in Freemasonry three types of images are constructed: verbal, mental, and graphical. The verbal ones are derived from the practice of the ritual, not just the descriptive parts of it, but from the whole meaning of the ceremony. They are built through the metaphor, the synecdoche, and the description

In the same way, through the mental images we have the dreams,

the memories, and the ideas. Thus, the imagination, the mental picture, the idea of the lodge, the legends, the journeys around the lodge room, are also an important part of the process of forming the masonic imagery.

The experiences of the rituals printed the masonic symbols and allegories in the minds of initiates, synchronically, the Freemasons were forming, and thereafter depicting, the representation of a verbally constructed and mentally elaborated universe.

The outcome of this path, following verbal and mental images, is the third type of image: the graphic. In this category are pictures, designs, statutes, and everything that has materiality.<sup>10</sup> Curiously, an abundance of graphic images related to Freemasonry during the eighteenth-century appeared in anti-masonic publishing. Nevertheless, for the freemasons there was the additional input of the drawings on the floor of the masonic lodge, made and erased each meeting, and their own depictions starting to be visible in their regalia, and in France, in their tracing boards.

Is possible to observe, and therefore establish a work hypothesis, that Masonic imagery has several elements in common with emblems, being probably a survival of that culture. The sophistication of Freemasonry may be credited to its syncretism. While emblems relied on a tradition that had not much space to renew itself, due to the inseparable nature of image and poem, and the literary cannons built around it; Freemasonry, unceremoniously, divided both.

In masonic rituals, the images, the *pictura*, would be all over; in the verbal images constructed in the rituals; drawn on the floor of the lodge; in the objects furnishing the lodge; in the several depictions of symbols present in aprons, panels, and illustrations of masonic literature.

The text and performance of masonic ritual thus took the place of moralising poems. More than read and absorb these values under a literary, and possibly hermetic, style, through Free-

masonry the connection between symbols, allegories and moral philosophy was explained and experienced through the performance of ritual.

What Freemasonry developed was the public depiction of images, being those symbols or allegories used by the Fraternity, or depicting passages of the ritual, and the concealed explanation of their moral and/or spiritual meaning. Basically, formatting and standardizing the *pictura*, and offering the *poesis* for its initiates.