

MASONIC BLUE

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by: Unknown

The inquirer who asks why the Ancient Craft Masonry is “blue” - why speak of Blue Lodge, Blue Degrees, wear aprons edged with blue, suspend jewel about the necks of officers with blue ribbons - is faced at once with two divergent schools of thought. One of these is the practical, hard-headed, founded-on-fact school of the Masonic historian and antiquary; the other is that which associates ideas with objects, colors, numbers, beasts, birds, natural phenomena, etc., as symbolism has been developed and followed throughout the history of mankind.

Historians both Masonic and secular agree that the square has been a symbol of rectitude, honesty, fair dealing, justice the world over for unknown ages. But the symbolist who reads much into the familiar square apron, with its triangular flap, is at once confronted with the undoubted fact that this form of apron is modern, not ancient. The invention of the square as a tool must have been coincident with the first appreciation of the right angle, and the advantages, in solidity and ease of construction, of the use of stones and timbers which were squared. Its Symbolism, therefore goes back to “time immemorial.” Masonic aprons used by operative masons were simple skins of any shape or no particular shape. With the change from operative to speculative, the apron became conventionaized, but only in comparatively recent times did it assume its present rectangular and triangular features. The symbolism read into its present shape will not fit, for instance, the aprons worn by George Washington, which had curved flaps and rounded corners. Blue as the color for Ancient Craft Masonry is accounted for by two schools of thought on its origin. Both can adduce considerable evidence. One believes that the symbolism of the color, like that of the square, comes to us from “time immemorial” and that the color must have been adopted because of its meanings; the other demonstrates that blue as a Masonic color is not as old as the Mother Grand Lodge, and that it was adopted for other than symbolic reasons. Blue was a sacred color to the priests of Israel. The color is mentioned first in the Old Testament in Exodus XXV:3-4, in which the Lord Commands Moses to speak to the children of Israel: “And this is the offering which ye shall take of them; gold, and silver, and brass, and blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and goat’s hair.”

Throughout Exodus and Numbers are many references to the color, and several are to be found in Chronicles, Esther, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. We read of the “fine twined linens,” “Make the ephod of Gold and Blue,” “bind the breastplates with a lace of blue,” “pomegranates of blue,” “an hanging for the tabernacle of blue,” “needlework of blue,” “a cloth wholly of blue, etc.

Perhaps the most interesting allusion is in Numbers XV:37-38-39-40:

“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue; And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring;

That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God.”

Mackey notes that the blue of the Old Testament is a translation of the Hebrew “tekelet” which is derived from a root signifying “perfection.” He develops the idea that the blue was anciently, and universally sacred as follows:

“Among the Druids, “blue” was the symbol of “truth” and the candidate, in the initiation into the sacred rights of Druidism, was invested with a robe composed of the colors, white, “blue” and green. “The Egyptians esteemed “blue” as a sacred color, and the body of Amun, the principal God of their theogony, was painted light “blue,” to imitate. as Wilkinson remarks, ‘His peculiarly 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 the Deity, because, being, as they say, composed of black and red, this color is a fit representation of the obscure and brilliant, the male and the female, or active and passive principles.

“The Hindus assert that their God, Vishnu, was represented by a celestial or sky “blue,” thus indicating that wisdom emanating from God was to be symbolized by this color.

“Among the medieval Christians, “blue” was sometimes considered as an emblem of immortality, as red was of the Divine Love. Portal says that “blue” was the symbol of perfection, hope and constancy. “The color of the celebrated dome, ‘azure,’ was in Divine language the symbol of eternal truth; in consecrated language, of immortality; and in profane for which Masons strive.”

Our ancient brethren met on hills and in vales, over which the blue vault of heaven is a ceiling; Jacob in his wisdom saw the ladder ascending from earth to heaven; the covering of a Lodge is the clouded canopy or starry decked heaven. These allusions seem to connote that blue, the color of the sky, is that of all celestial attributes for which Masons strive.

Man’s earliest forms of worship were of the sun and fire. The sun rose, traveled and set in a realm of blue; to associate the color with Deity was inevitable. Blue also is the color of the ocean, of mountain streams, of lakes, of good drinking water - that blue should also become emblematical of purity is equally natural. In heraldry, blue or azure

signifies chasity, loyalty and fidelity. In painting, the color is frequently used in an emblematical manner, as in depicting an angel's robe and the robe of the Virgin Mary, to signify humility, fidelity and especially faith. It is the color of hope. It has been held to signify eternity and immortality; pale blue is especially associated with peace. Of forty-seven nations, twenty-seven have blue in their flags; all, doubtless with the same thought that Brother Wilbur D. Nesbit so beautifully expressed:

Your Flag and my Flag

And how it flies today

In your land and my land

And half a world away!

Rose-Red and Blood-Red

The stripes forever gleam;

Snow-white and Soul-white

The good forefathers' dream;

“Sky-blue and true-blue

With stars to gleam aright -

The glorious guidon of the day

A shelter through the night.

There seem to be many grounds on which he can firmly stand who believes that Freemasonry adopted blue as the color of the three degrees with its ancient symbolism in mind. Yet it is to be remembered that Freemasonry as we know it was not formed overnight, by any one group of men, each of whom contributed some idea to its ritual, ceremonies, ancient usages and customs. No committee sat about a table to decide the question “what color shall we adopt by which the Ancient Craft shall forever more be distinguished?” It is possible, of course, that the ancient operative masons, from whose guilds and organizations modern Freemasonry came as a result of slow evolution, may have had an especial reverence for the color blue. As has been noted, blue has been associated from early times in ecclesiastical history with the Virgin Mary. The earliest document of Freemasonry, the Regius Poem (1390) has two lines:

“Pray we now to God almyght And to hys moder, Mary brytht.” Which certainly connotes a reverence of these ancient Freemasons for Mary the Mother, and may easily be considered ground for thinking that the early builders also revered her special color.

However that may be, it is obvious that the absence of any evidence is not negative evidence; it is commonplace of human experience that in the face of any positive evidence for an idea, in the absence of any evidence against it, the fact should be admitted. All of which brings us to what we know of the earliest use of blue as a Masonic color, regardless of how much we may wish that our forefathers had adopted blue for the symbolism we are now content to read into the hue of heaven.

Two extracts from the minutes of the Grand Lodge of England (1717) are explicit upon the matter of color:

“Resolved, nem. con, that in private Lodges and Quarterly Communications and General Meetings, the Masters and Wardens do wear Jewells of Masonry hanging to a White Ribbon (vizt.) That the Master wear the square, the Senr. Warden the Levell, the Junr. Warden the Plumb-Rule.”

G.L. MINUTES, 24th JUNE, 1727.

“Dr. Desagulier taking notice of some irregularities in wearing the marks of Distinction which have been allowed by former Grand Lodges. “Proposed, that none but the Grand Master, his Deputy and Wardens shall wear their Jewels in Gold or Gilt pendant to blue ribbons about their necks and white leather Aprons lined with blue silk. “That all those who have served any of the three Grand Offices shall wear the like Aprons lined with Blue Silk in all Lodges and assemblies of Masons when they appear clothed. “That all Masters and Wardens of Lodges may wear their Aprons lined with White Silk and their respective Jewels with plain white Ribbons but of no other color whatsoever.

“The Deputy Grand Master accordingly put the question whether the above regulation should be agreed to.

“And it was carried in the affirmative. Nemine Con.”

G.L. Minutes, 17th March, 1731.

But why did the Grand Lodge adopt, or permit, “blue” in 1731, when “white” was specified just four years previously? Passing over the common but wholly coincidental “reason” - that many taverns where Masons met were distinguished by blue signs, such as the Blue Boar - the sanest theory seems to be that proposed by the noted Masonic scholar Fred J.W. Crowe. He wrote (1909-10 “Lodge of Research Transactions).

“The color of the Grand Lodge Officers clothing was adopted from the ribbon of the Most Noble Order of the Garter. The Grand Stewards from the second National Order - the Most Honourable Order of the Bath. The Scottish Grand Lodge undoubtedly copied the ribbon of the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle, and the Grand Lodge of Ireland anticipated the formation of the Most Illustrious Order of St. Patrick in 1788 by selecting light Blue - thus accidentally completing the series, although I would suggest that light Blue may in all probability have been chosen merely to mark a

difference from the English Grand Lodge. In like manner I believe the light blue of our own private Lodge clothing was, by a natural sequence of ideas, adopted to contrast with the deeper colour of Grand Lodge attire, and not very long after the last-named became the rule.”