

The Meaning and History of the Jewels and Symbols of a Past Master

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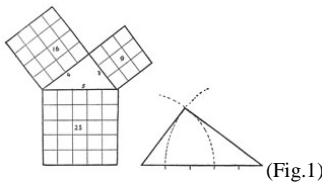
As Freemasons we are quite aware of the powerful nature of symbols. From our first preparations to enter the Fraternity, we have been taught through symbolism. We have found meaning and comfort in symbols. And have, if we are true to our charges, striven to improve our character by their teachings, as we travel toward the rising sun, in the footsteps of the Widow's Son. This essay will explore the meaning and historical usage of the specific symbols used to represent a Past Master of a Craft Lodge.

47th Prop. Of Euclid Suspended by a Square

From a current global perspective, the most widely used Past Master's symbol consists of the 47th Proposition of Euclid suspended from a Square. The 47th proposition of Euclid has been used in Masonic symbolism at least as early as 1735 when it was published in Smith's Pocket Companion. However, no evidence can be found that it was used specifically as a Past Master's symbol until the year 1815 when the first Book of Constitutions of the United Grand Lodge of England was published, and the prescription for a Past Master's Jewel consisting of "The square and diagram of the 47th prop. 1st B of Euclid, engraved on a silver plate pendent within it." was codified.ⁱ

In order to understand why this symbol was chosen to represent the office of Past Master, we must first look at the meaning of The 47th proposition of Euclid. This proposition teaches one of the most important principles of geometry, known to us as the Pythagorean Theorem, which is communicated by the formula " $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ " when working with a Right Triangle where "C" represents the hypotenuse. We are also taught that whenever a triangle has a side length ratio of Three, Four and Five, the triangle will be a right triangle.ⁱⁱ

Pythagorean's Theorem is appropriate for the Past Master because it teaches us that when working with Right Triangles (a reference to the Master's Square), the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the square of the other two sides as shown in figure 1.ⁱⁱⁱ



(Fig.1)



(Fig.2)

This symbol is suspended from a Square, to show that the Past Master has learned how to make complex constructions from the simple angle of ninety degrees. This is symbolic of the knowledge and wisdom that a Craft Lodge Past Master has gained from his service to the Craft. This Past Master's Jewel is illustrated in Figure 2. This jewel has changed aesthetically over time. Originally, the square was hung so that one arm was perpendicular to the ground, and the other parallel to it.

Even in many of the jurisdictions that do not use the 47th Proposition of Euclid in their Past Master's jewel, this proposition is referenced in the lectures of their rituals. It is important to note however, that any claim that Pythagoras was a Freemason, or that he shouted "I have Found it" and slaughtered cattle upon his discovery of this equation, are best understood as apocryphal legend, and not as historical fact. It is also important to know, that while Western culture credits Pythagoras with this discovery, historians tell us that the Ancient Egyptians and Babylonians had understood and utilized this equation at much earlier dates.^{iv}

Also of interest to note is the use of the 3, 4, 5 length ratio of a Right Triangle in some jurisdictions. In those ritual traditions, a candidate will traverse the lodge three times as an Entered Apprentice, four times as a Fellow Craft, and five times as a Master Mason, thus "forming a Square" by the time he is Raised.

It is clear that there is much to be learned from the symbolism of this Past Master's Jewel.



fig.3

The Compass, Square Sun,, and Quadrant

The oldest known Past Master's Symbol consists of the Compass, Sun, Square and Quadrant. This is the most popular Past Master's Jewel used in the United States. The earliest written evidence that a Past Master's jewel in this form was used can be found in an exposé of Masonry published in April of 1760 entitled Three Distinct Knocks which said "The Pass Master Hath the Compasses and Sun with a Line of Cords About his Neck."^v

This symbol includes the Square to remind us that it is by the Square that the wearer governed his lodge as Master. The Quadrant shows what angle the Compass is opened at. This is appropriate for the symbol of a Past Master, because it is by the Compass that the Freemason keeps himself within due bounds of all mankind. And, it is the role of the Worshipful Master to ensure that all members of his lodge, and all Regular Masons living within his lodge's jurisdiction are making proper use of their moral compass. It also generally shows that the Compass is opened to the angle of 60 degrees. This is significant because 60 degrees is the angle of an equilateral triangle. The equilateral triangle represents perfect balance, as all sides are of equal length, and the triangle appears the same from all directions. It therefore teaches that the man who wears this jewel has learned the lessons of Freemasonry, and lives a balanced life. It also shows that the wearer of this jewel has served equally in the South, the West, and the East.

The Sun is used in this symbol to represent that the wearer has observed the sun at , 1. its meridian height in the South, 2.its setting in the West, and 3.its rising in the East. The Sun also represents light. And, it is understood that the Past Master of a Craft Lodge is a source of Masonic Light to his brothers. It closely shares the meaning of the

Pentalpha in Masonic symbolism and has on occasion been interchanged with it. Thus it is also appropriate to say that the Sun represents perfect light.^{vi}

It is of interest to note that the Grand Lodge of Scotland uses this symbol as their Past Master's Jewel, without the Sun.

The Compass, Sun and Quadrant

In several jurisdictions, especially in the United States, the Past Master's Symbol consists of the Compass, Sun and Quadrant. The meaning of the Compass, and Sun are the same as in the symbol described above. However, this symbol is unique, as it can also be understood to be a sextant.

A sextant is a tool of navigation, used to measure altitude, and enable one to determine his location, and thus plot a course to travel. This is a very appropriate symbol for a Past Master, as he has had to navigate the course of his lodge during his Eastern tenure. It also shows that he is capable of assisting in the navigation of the lodge, if his successors may request his assistance.^{vii}



The Compass, Square and Letter "G"

Perhaps the most unique Past Master's symbol is found in Ireland. The Irish Past Master's symbol consists of the Compass, Square, and Letter "G" in the center. This is in fact the same symbol used to represent Freemasonry in general, in the United States and other places.

To most of the world, this symbol shows the Compass, the Square and a letter which represents "God", "Geometry", "Grand Architect of The Universe", or perhaps the Volume of Sacred Law.

In Ireland, however, the letter "G" is not used to represent any of those things. It is represented in the lodge room, above the Master's Chair. It is also represented in the jewel of a Past Master. This is because to the Irish Master, the letter "G" serves to remind him of a word that is very special to him, and all other Installed Masters alone.^{viii}

ⁱ To Talk of Many Things by Most Worshipful Brother David C. Bradley

ⁱⁱ Spirit of Masonry in Moral and Elucidatory Lectures Wm. Hutchinson. London: J. Wilke, 1775.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 47th Proposition of the 1st Book of Euclid as part of the Jewel of a Past Master by: Brother Thomas Greene

^{iv} Euclid's Elements, Book I, Proposition 47 D.E.Joyce, Clark University 1996

^v To Talk of Many Things by Most Worshipful Brother David C. Bradley

^{vi} H. R. A. Grand Chapter Register ("Ancients") Lau. Derrnott C.F. Kell, Litho, 8, Furnival St Holborn, E.C

^{vii} The Instructive Tongue by: Bro. Louis F. Bandell, Jr., P.M., W.M. 2003.

^{viii} The Letter G by Bro. Mark Dwor