

Colour Symbolism in Freemasonry

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Colour is a fundamental element of masonic symbolism. It appears in the descriptions of aprons, sashes and other items of regalia, in the furnishings and wall-hangings of the lodge room for each degree or ceremony, in the robes worn in certain degrees, and in many other masonic accoutrements. The colours specified in each case appear to have no rational justification. As A.E. Waite wrote: "There is no recognized scheme or science of colors in Masonry. Here and there in our rituals we find an 'explanation' for the use of a certain colour, but this usually turns out to be merely a peg on which to hang a homiletic lecture about it, having little if any connection with the origins of its use."

This paper seeks to find some rationale behind the selection of colours as masonic symbols, restricting our examination to the Craft degrees, and those of the Ancient and Accepted (Scottish) Rite, with occasional reference to the Royal Arch.

It was early recognized that colours have a strong influence on the mind and therefore can be employed for certain moral or aesthetic ends, through symbolical, allegorical and mystical allusions. Newton wrote of 'the sensual and moral effects of colour,' where sensual must be understood as 'transmitted by the senses.' Goethe, too, wrote extensively on colour (over 2,000 pages!).

Masonic Blue

Blue, then, is the Craft colour par excellence, used in aprons, collars, and elsewhere. Let us quote Bro. Chetwode Crawley. "The ordinary prosaic enquirer will see in the selection of blue as the distinctive colour of Freemasonry only the natural sequence of the legend of King Solomon's Temple. For the Jews had been Divinely commanded to wear...a 'riband of blue' (Numbers 15:38).' A modern translation of that verse in Numbers is: 'You are to take tassels on the comers of your garments with a blue cord on each tassel.' The biblical text, then, refers to blue cords to be incorporated in the tassels worn by pious Jews, while Bro. Chetwode Crawley is speaking of blue ribbons which somehow became the embellishments of aprons, sashes and collars.

Another suggested source of the colour mentioned by Bro. Chetwode Crawley could be its association with St. Mary, mother of Jesus, 'so prominent a figure in the pre-Reformation invocations of the Old Charges, drawing in her train the red ensign of St. George of Cappadocia, her steward and our Patron Saint.'

Blue and red, the heraldic azure and gules are sometimes associated with the chevron of the Arms of the Masons' Company.

The Masonic Symbolism of Colours

a) White

White, the original colour of the masonic apron, was always considered an emblem of purity and innocence, exemplified in images such as the white lily or fallen snow.

Plato asserts that white is par excellence the colour of the gods. In the Bible, Daniel sees God as a very old man, dressed in robes white as snow (Daniel 7:9). In the New Testament Jesus is transfigured on Mount Tabor before Peter, James and John, when his clothes became 'dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them' (Mark 9:3). Officiating priests of many religions wore and still wear white garments. In ancient Jerusalem both the priests and the Levites who performed the Temple rites assumed white clothing.

Among Romans, the unblemished character of a person aspiring to public office was indicated by a toga whitened with chalk. This is the origin of the word 'candidate,' from candidatus 'dressed in white.' Verdicts at trials were decided by small stones (calculi) thrown into an urn: white to absolve, black to condemn.

White signifies beginnings, virtualities, the white page facing the writer, 'the space where the possible may become reality.' White is therefore understandably the colour of initiation. It is a symbol of perfection, as represented by the swan in the legend of Lohengrin. In this aspect it is related to light or sky blue, which in Hebrew is tchelet and may be connected semantically with tichla (perfection, completeness) and tach-lit (completeness, purpose). (See also the observations on the symbolism of blue.) Among the Celts the sacred colours of white, blue and green were understood to stand for light, truth and hope. Druids were robed in white.

White is also connected with the idea of death and resurrection. Shrouds are white; spirits are represented as wearing white veils. White, rather than black, is sometimes the colour of mourning, among the ancient kings of France, for instance, and in Japan. White, finally, can signify joy. Leukos (Greek) means both white and cheerful; as does candidus in Latin. The Romans marked festive days with lime and unlucky days with charcoal.

b) Blue

Blue is the colour of the canopy of heaven:

azure, cerulean or sky blue. 'Universally, it denotes immortality, eternity, chastity, fidelity; pale blue, in particular, represents prudence and goodness.' In the Royal Arch, the Third Principal is told that it is an

emblem of benefi-cence and charity.

In biblical times, blue was closely related to purple. Generations of scholars have puzzled over the correct meaning of tchelet (light blue) and argaman (purple), usually mentioned together, without reaching satisfactory conclusions. Only recently has the problem been finally solved in the course of far-reaching research into the dyestuffs and dyeing methods used by the ancient Phoenicians and Hebrews. Both colours, it turns out, were produced with dyeing materials extracted from murex, a shellfish abundant on the coast of Lebanon. The tchelet was obtained from a short-variety (murex trunculus); the argaman came from two kinds: the single-spined murex brandaris and, to a lesser extent, the Red-mouth (thais haemastoma).

Some historians have concluded that, in the Middle Ages in Europe, blue was low in popular esteem. The favourite colour was then red because the dyers could achieve strong shades of it which brought to mind the prestigious purple of the ancient world. Towards the end of that period, blue gradually became recognized as a princely colour, the 'Royal Blue' which displaced red at court, red then being used by the lower classes and so regarded as vulgar. Blue and gold (or yellow) then became the colours of choice for shields, banners and livery.

It may not be by chance, therefore, that the Master was said to be clothed in 'yellow jacket and blue breeches,' in the famous metaphor first used in an exposure, 'The Mystery of Free-Masonry,' which appeared in The Daily Journal in 1730. The traditional explanations of the phrase relate it to the compasses, the arms of gold, gilt or brass and the points of steel or iron. (Steel can certainly appear blue; iron can not!)

Blue was used royally in France noticeably as the background to the fleur-de-lys. It became associated with terms of prestige such as blue blood, cordon bleu (originally the sash of the Order of the Holy Spirit), blue riband (of the Atlantic) and blue chip.

c) Purple

Purple is a symbol of imperial royalty and richness but can also relate to penitence and the solemnity of Lent and Advent in the seasons of the Christian church.

Although described (in the Royal Arch, for instance) as 'an emblem of union, being composed of blue and crimson,' I believe this to be a somewhat contrived explanation. But an interesting fact, which appears to have escaped most writers on this subject, is that in the Cabbala, the Hebrew word for purple, argaman, is a mnemonic, representing the initials of the names of the five principal angels in Jewish esoterism.

d) Red

Red or crimson, the colour of fire and heat, is traditionally associated with war and the military. In Rome the paludamentum, the robe worn by generals, was red. The colour of blood is naturally connected with the idea of sacrifice, struggle and heroism. It also signifies charity, devotion, abnegation--perhaps recalling the pelican that feeds its progeny with its own blood.

In Hebrew, the name of the first man, Adam, is akin to red, blood and earth. This connection with earth may explain, perhaps, the connection of red with the passions, carnal love, the cosmetics used by women to attract their lovers. It is the colour of youth. Generally, it represents expansive force and vitality. It is the emblem of faith and fortitude and, in the Royal Arch, of fervency and zeal. It has also a darker side, connected with the flames of hell, the appearance of demons, the apoplectic face of rage.

Scarlet was the distinctive colour of the Order of the Golden Fleece, established in 1429 by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy (1419-67). Not only was the mantle scarlet, but also the robe and a special hat--the chaperon--with hanging streamers.

e) Green

Green has been directly associated with the ideas of resurrection and immortality...The acacia (the masonic evergreen) has been suggested as a symbol of a moral life or rebirth, and also of immortality. To the ancient Egyptians, green was the symbol of hope.

The Grand Lodge of Scotland has adopted green as its emblematic colour, and, in varying shades, it is incorporated in the dress and furnishings of degrees and Orders beyond the Craft in English, Irish and Scottish Freemasonry.

f) Yellow

Yellow is rarely seen in lodge, except perhaps on the Continent. It is an ambivalent colour, representing both the best and the worst, the colour of brass and honey, but also the colour of sulphur and cowardice. Yellow is the perfection of the Golden Age, the priceless quality of the Golden Fleece and the golden apples of the Hesperides. It is also the colour of the patch imposed on the Jews as a badge of infamy. In the sixteenth century, the door of a traitor's home was painted yellow. A 'jaundiced view' expresses hostility, but the most memorable symbolism of yellow is that it reminds us of the sun and of gold.

g) Black

The three fundamental colours found in all civilizations, down to the

Middle Ages in Europe, are white, red and black. These, too, may be regarded as the principal colours of Freemasonry: the white of the Craft degrees, the red of the Royal Arch and of certain of the degrees of the Ancient and Accepted (Scottish) Rite, and the black of some of its others, and of the Knights of Malta. The other colours of the rainbow find limited uses; they serve only to frame or line the white lambskin upon which so many aprons are based, or for sashes and other items of regalia.

Traditionally, black is the colour of darkness, death, the underworld although it was not introduced for mourning until about the middle of the fourteenth century, such use becoming habitual only in the sixteenth. The 'black humour' of melancholy (atara hilis) the black crow of ill omen, the black mass, black market, 'black days': all refer to negative aspects. The Black Stone at Mecca is believed by Muslims to have been at one time white; the sins of man caused the transformation.

Black has also a positive aspect, that of gravity and sobriety; the Reformation in Europe frowned upon colourful clothing. Formal dress for day and evening wear continues to be black. It is associated with the outlaw and the banners of pirates and anarchists, but also with rebirth and transformation.

In the French and Scottish Rites, the lodge in the third degree is decorated in black and is strewn with white or silver tears, representing the sorrow caused by the death of Hiram Abif.

Conclusion

A review of the traditional explanations for the choice of certain colours in masonic symbolism reveals their weaknesses. In considering the use of blue in the English regalia of a Master Mason, it has been possible to find a connection between one of the Hebrew words for that colour and the Holy Bible.