

Another Take On The Wayfarer

by **Stephen Dafoe**

Sigmund Freud has long been connected to the saying, "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," although it's doubtful he ever said it. Regardless of who actually coined the phrases, it is a piece of advice that we Freemasons would do well to keep in mind when trying to find hidden Masonic meaning in things that may not be Masonic at all. As we learned in the previous article, John J. Robinson claimed Hieronymus Bosch's painting The Wayfarer contains elements considered to be Masonic in nature. The mistake we make in making these connections is that we fail to extend our researches outside the world of Freemasonry and its symbolism. Before making the claim that Bosch hid Masonic symbols in his paintings, we must weigh the painting against his other work, work of his contemporaries and iconography and symbolism as it existed at the time the paint was drying.

Let's assume for a moment that Bosch rolled up the Wayfarer's pant leg, gave him one slipper, replicated the cable tow around his chest and put a plumb bob in his hat. These are all certainly Masonic in nature and representative of Masonic initiation. Why then did Bosch paint a dagger at his side? Are we to imply that Freemasonry as it existed in Bosch's time allowed the candidate to bring something offensive or defensive into the lodge room? Or do we come to the crux of the problem in these types of claims, that believing is seeing. As Freemasons, we certainly can't be faulted for seeing the symbols of Freemasonry in the world around us; and if it briefly reminds us of the lesson of the symbol, then the absorption of Masonic teaching has been effective. However, when we extend that visual and mental connection to a belief that Bosch must have been a Freemason, or knight templar at least aware of Freemasonry, we must be willing to put the claim to scrutiny. But, we seldom do so. We want to believe that Freemasonry existed before 1717 and the further back the better, so we are willing to accept those elements that confirm the notion, while omitting or glossing over those that do not—the dagger being an absurd example.

Before looking at the supposed Masonic symbolism in further detail, we should understand something about Bosch and his work. Although The Wayfarer is well known to Freemasons because of Robinson's claims, it is actually a later version of Bosch's The Path of Life, which formed the outer panels or shutters of his Haywain Triptych. A triptych panel painting consists of three interior panels that are hinged like a dart board, with a fourth painting on the exterior shutters. Like The Wayfarer, Bosch's Path of Life depicts a vagabond being accosted by a dog along a road. Although there is no decrepit pub in the background, Bosch has provided a similar theme of the sinful ways of mankind through other forms of human debauchery and violence. But what remains the same in this earlier rendition is the central character, a man clearly in a state of poverty, although he still owns both his boots in the earlier work. Bosch's vagabond is similar to the Fool character from the Tarot in that he is an impoverished individual accosted by a dog that has torn his pants. The dog is said to represent either man's animal nature or the barking distractions of the real world. This is not to say that Bosch was hiding Tarot

symbolism any more than he was hiding Masonic symbolism. Rather, it is intended to illustrate that symbolism and iconography were common in a variety of traditions embraced by artists.

For example, the square, compasses, plumbline and beehive all make an appearance in Caesar Ripa's *Iconologia* or *Moral Emblems*, first published in 1593; just eight decades after Bosch painted *The Wayfarer*. Ripa's *iconologia* was the most influential of the emblem books, used by artists to give visual representations of human virtues, judgment was represented in *Jcoriologia* by a man trying to sit on a rainbow while holding the square, rule, compasses and plumbline. In explaining the symbolism, Ripa wrote that "the instruments denote Discourse, and Choice, Ingenuity should make of Methods to understand, and judge of any thing; for he judges not aright, who would measure every thing in one and the same Manner." Although this example could be used as evidence that Ripa must have been a Freemason, or at least in possession of Masonic secrets, the simple fact remains that the symbols that we use in Freemasonry are not exclusive to Freemasonry, nor were they when Freemasonry evolved out of the operative stone mason's guilds.

But let's look at the elements of Bosch's painting claimed to be Masonic that are easily dismissible. Robinson claimed that the backpack could represent the cable tow because the strap is not in the proper place. However, both *The Wayfarer* and *The Path of Life* depict the pack's strap across the chest. In fact, there is a carving of a pilgrim at England's Lincoln Cathedral, which predates either of Bosch's paintings that also has the strap across the chest. If one looks at old painting they will find that Bosch's depiction was hardly unique. Next we have the argument that the man's lack of hat and hood is somehow connected to the idiom "to pull the wool over your eyes." Contrary to Robinson's assertion, the term originated in the United States circa 1839 and related to powdered wigs and not Masonic hoodwinks. Additionally, the term hoodwinked, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary originated in 1562, some years after Bosch's demise. At any rate, a logical look at the painting would suggest that the wayfarer was recently chucked out of the pub, hence his hat in hand. Next we have the assertion that the gate somehow forms a craftsman's square atop the gate. It also forms a triangle, which makes the painting equally Egyptian in nature, if one wants to claim it as such. As we have already seen, the square was a common moral symbol in art in Bosch's time and can be traced back to ancient China, so why would there be a need to conceal the symbol in a fence post? Robinson also claimed that knight templar the trouser leg was rolled up to the knee. This is a perfect example of the tendency to see what we want to see. The pant leg is barely rolled past the ankle, let alone up to the knee. However, when combined with the slipper on the left foot, it does present a compelling argument for a Masonic connection.

But this does not make it so. Bosch's work has been analyzed by a number of art historians over the years who have given a variety of interpretations to the painting including a representation of the Prodigal Son. One of the most compelling was put forth by Philip Leider from the Department of Art History of California, Irvine. It was Leider's belief that the painting was a representation of the Wandering Jew. For those unfamiliar with the legend, when Christ was making his way to Calvary, a Jew named Cartaphilus

struck him and told him to move quicker. Jesus condemned him to wander the earth until His return. Although the tale originates in the Gospel of Matthew 16:28, the story gained currency in the thirteenth century in Roger of Wendover's Flores Historiarum, which tells the story of Cartaphilus, a Jewish shoemaker, cursed by Jesus to walk the earth until Christ's return. According to the legend, Cartaphilus converted to Christianity and spent his days wandering and proselytizing the faith.

If Leider is correct, some of the elements of The Wayfarer, viewed by Robinson as Masonic take on a new light. The one shoe and one boot symbolism may indicate a wandering impoverished shoemaker, the plumb bob in his hat becomes a shoemaker's awl, and the triangle on the fence a symbol of the Christian Trinity and the new world Cartaphilus entered through his conversion.

Or perhaps a cigar is just a cigar.

Leidler's article The Identity of Hieronymus Bosch's Wayfarer can be seen at:
http://www.tau.ac.il/arts/projects/PUB/assaph-ar*k,/assaph6/articles_assaph6/Leider.pdf

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