

Inspired by Fashion Knight Templar Regalia

By
Aimee E. Newell

For decades, popular television programs and movies have poked fun at fraternal groups by featuring characters that belong to made-up fraternities with goofy names and even funnier hats and costumes. In the real world, members and non-members alike have often perceived Masonic costume as weird, silly, or outlandish.

Indeed, Masonic regalia does have an element of wackiness. Yet, we may think the same thing about the clothing we see in historic prints, paintings, and photographs from the 1700s and 1800s. Even people of the era reacted to what they perceived as the extremes of fashion and lampooned them in cartoons and satires. Then, as now, fashion itself was as wacky, if not more so, than the regalia that Masonic groups wore. When we start to look closely, by comparing Masonic costumes with everyday clothing from the same time periods, we can see that regalia manufacturers often took their cue from popular fashions.

This was the theme behind an exhibition at the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library in Lexington, Massachusetts, *Inspired by Fashion: American Masonic Regalia*. In the exhibition, which ran through March 10, 2012, garments and images from the Museum's collection helped trace the inspiration behind Masonic regalia and costume. Each section of the gallery explored a source of this inspiration – contemporary fashion, knight templar



Unidentified Knight Templar Member, 1860-1869, T.B. Sherriff, Sacramento, California. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, gift in memory of Jacques Noel Jacobsen, 2008.039.38.

the military, Orientalism, and the theater – to show the connections between Masonic fashions and everyday style over the centuries.

In these pages, I will highlight the section on military inspiration which is evident from Knight Templar regalia. During the 1700s and early 1800s, most Freemasons wore aprons and sashes that

their female relatives or a local milliner made especially for them. As clothing manufacturing began to industrialize in the mid and late 1800s, Masonic regalia followed right along. Entrepreneurs devoted to Masonic and fraternal regalia and costumes established their businesses in a number of American cities and sold their products both locally and via mail order.



The Defenders of the Union, 1861, Sarony, Major, and Knapp, lithographers, Goupil and Company, publishers, New York, New York. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, gift of John H. Van Gorden, 81.44.48.

A turning point came after the Civil War. Some uniform companies that had provided thousands of garments for soldiers switched over to producing Masonic and fraternal uniforms and regalia. This shift allowed them to recycle their patterns and forms while also using up surplus supplies like braid and bullion trims. This increased industrial capacity for making clothing coincided with men's growing participation in Freemasonry and other fraternal groups, so companies found a ready market for their products.

Illustrations of soldiers in uniform became commonplace in newspapers and magazines during the Civil War. A popular lithograph of prominent Union Army commanders, including George B. McClellan (1826-1885), Winfield Scott (1786-1866), and Benjamin F. Butler (1818-1893), shows the typical uniform style. The trims used on the uniforms worn by these men were quickly adapted for use on Masonic regalia after the war.

When the Civil War began in 1861, it profoundly affected all aspects of American life and culture including fashion. As thousands of men on both sides of the conflict turned out in uniform, military-style clothing became the vogue. From the mid-1860s through the end of the 1800s, Masonic regalia – and even women's fashions – took their cue from military uniforms, incorporating epaulettes, piped seams, and tailored silhouettes.

Many Knights Templar are pictured with numerous badges and jewels pinned to the chest of their uniform.

At a distance, the subject of this photograph, George T. Anderson (1824-1901), with his many medals, looks like a military officer. In fact, Anderson was Grand Commander of the Knights Templar of Georgia in 1875.

After the war, many Freemasons joined the Knights Templar. The group's explosion in membership at this time is not coincidental. Many local militia units, which had provided men with an opportunity for sociability, disbanded at the end of the Civil War. Joining a fraternity, particularly one with a military-



George T. Anderson, Grand Commander, Knights Templar of Georgia, ca. 1875, Smith and Motes, Atlanta, Georgia. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, gift in memory of Jacques Noel Jacobsen, 2008.039.27.

style uniform and activities like marching formations filled a void that many men felt. An image of New York City's Columbian Commandery No. 1 shows the men in crisp uniforms standing in formation just like a military unit. Columbian Com-

mandery No. 1 even drilled at New York's Eighth Regiment Armory. The ideals that the Knights Templar espoused related to noble and honorable behavior which appealed to members. The regalia provided a means of communicating these

ideals while building on a contemporary style that Americans understood.

By the late 1800s, menswear had become extremely standardized, offering

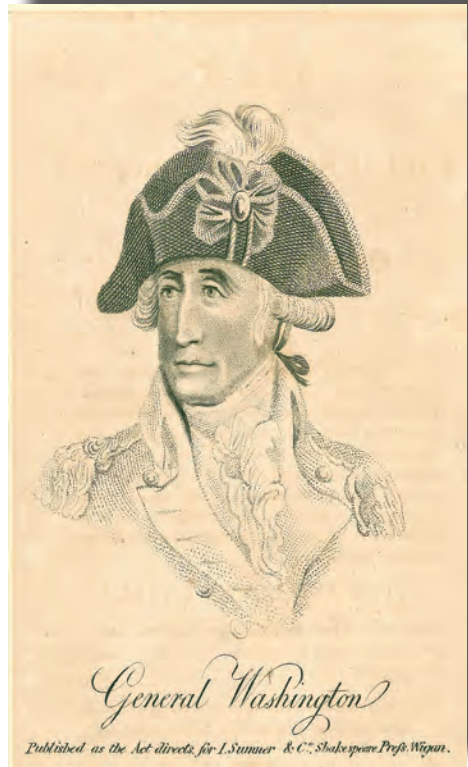


Knights Templar Columbian Commandery No. 1, ca. 1900, New York, New York. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, 2001.083.2. Photograph by David Bohl.

little room for fancy and display. Men, regardless of their profession or their location, became somewhat indistinguishable from each other. Following this trend, large regalia houses began offering factory-produced aprons, sashes, and uniforms. Materials, colors, and styles were similar throughout the country. But even this standardized regalia offered men a way to dress expressively, particularly during degree rituals and public processions.

Historic photographs from the Museum's collection show us what the Knight Templar uniform looked like in the past – black chapeau-de-bras style hat with plume, black or white velvet sash, black velvet apron, usually with a skull and crossbones symbol, large gauntlet-style gloves, sword, and prominent medals. A carte-de-visite photograph of an unidentified Knight Templar member from California provides an instructive image of the fraternity's uniform during the 1860s or 1870s, illustrating all of the major components.

While the influence of Civil War uniforms on Knight Templar regalia is evident in the coats, trousers, and sword belts, the uniform was also inspired by late-1700s elements that date back to the founding of the Masonic Knights Templar. Perhaps one of the most notable elements of the Knights Templar uniform is the chapeau-de-bras hat with its plumes. The name is French and comes from the words for "hat" and "arm," because the hat could be easily carried under one's arm when not wearing it on the head. The style was favored by gentlemen in the late 1700s and early 1800s and also became popular with American militias through the War of 1812.



General Washington, 1814, I. Sumner and Company, England. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Dr. William L. and Mary B. Guyton Collection, 86.61.142.

Two images in the Museum's collection demonstrate the prevalence of this hat style during the War of 1812 era. One is an engraving of George Washington, which depicts him wearing a chapeau-de-bras style hat. Although Washington had died in December 1799, this English engraving shows him wearing what was a stylish hat for 1814, the year the engraving was published. Likewise, an engraving from 1812, which was included in a Masonic exposé, shows the Master wearing a chapeau-de-bras and suggests that this style was not solely preferred by Knight Templar Commanderies.

While Knight Templar members did wear regalia from the start in the late 1700s, it was generally governed by loose traditions until the 1850s. The General Grand Encampment took steps to standardize the group's regalia at its 1859 meeting. Three years earlier, General Grand Master William B. Hubbard noted in his address at the 1856 meeting that he was not aware of "any statute or rule having been adopted establishing a uniform dress for the members at large." New rules on a standard uniform were presented in 1856, but there seems to have been some dissension about what was suggested, because Hubbard asked for input from the group, and approval of the "statute" was postponed to the next Triennial in 1859.

In 1859, the topic of costume once again was broached. Since there had been no formal rule presented by the grand body, individuals and individual states generally chose their own regalia. It seemed that the time had finally come. Grand Master Hubbard once again pleaded with the men to take steps to standardize their uniforms: "I...call your earnest attention to the importance and indeed imperious necessity of your adopting and establishing the dress and costume of a Knight Templar which shall be uniform and the same according to rank throughout your whole jurisdiction."

Hubbard did not have to wait long. On September 17, 1859, the Grand Encampment adopted the report of the Committee on Costume and then resolved "that the costume this day adopted...be worn by all Commanderies chartered at this communication or that shall be hereafter established...and that no officer, member or Knight be...allowed to sit in this Grand Encampment unless clothed in the uniform hereby prescribed..." The knight templar

prescribed uniform was described, with specific details noted for each element from chapeau to sword. The published edition of the 1859 *Proceedings* also included colored illustrations of the Templar's uniform and the Prelate's robes.

The Templar is dressed in a "white surcoat or tunic, made without sleeves, worn over a black coat and reaching down to the knees," with a red leather belt (to be two inches wide) and with a "red passion cross four inches high on the left breast." In the image, the cloak, gauntlets, sword, and chapeau all faithfully reflect the exact details specified by the Grand Encampment. The Prelate wears "a full white linen or muslin robe, open behind, reaching down to within



Unidentified Man in Knight Templar Prelate Costume, ca. 1876, W. Notman, Boston, Massachusetts. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, gift of Jacques Noel Jacobsen, Jr., 98.077.1.



Prelate in *Grand Encampment of Knights Templar for the United States of America Fourteenth Triennial Session, New Orleans, 1859.*

six inches of the feet, fastened around the neck below the cravat...and having flowing sleeves reaching to the middle of the hand." Details about the prelate's cloak, stole, and mitre also match the printed description in the *Proceedings*.

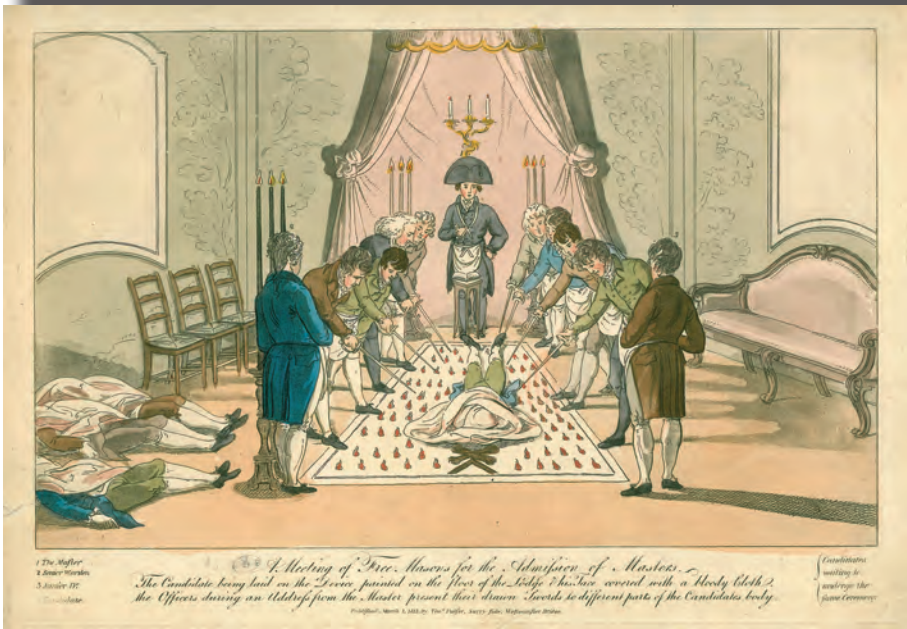
A photograph in the Museum's collection, showing an unidentified man in his prelate's costume from about 1876, shows that the basic regalia adopted in 1859 remained official throughout the 1800s. Although the question of costume continued to be discussed at the Triennial meetings, the Grand En-

campment remained committed to the idea of a standard "look." In 1862, they made a few changes based on feedback received. The committee explained that they "sought to attain the important objects of neatness, durability, economy, and distinctiveness of character..." This time, they once again included illustrations of the uniform in the printed *Proceedings*, but instead of colored illustrations, the images depict specific parts of the uniform, including the sash, the chapeau, and "shoulder straps."

So, when we look back to the time when the Knight Templar uniform was standardized, it is not surprising that it



Knight Templar in *Grand Encampment of Knights Templar for the United States of America Fourteenth Triennial Session, New Orleans, 1859.*



A Meeting of Free Masons for the Admission of Masters, 1812, Thomas Palsler, London, England. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Special Acquisitions Fund, 77.10.1e.

overlapped with the beginning of the Civil War, drawing on the military uniforms that were becoming a commonplace sight. This pattern was not only followed by the Knights Templar. As the Museum’s exhibition, *Inspired by Fashion*, explains, over the course of the fraternity’s existence, Freemasons developed and retained their regalia to suit both the organization’s needs and prevailing fashions. For Knights Templar, the traditional costumes reflect the group’s values and help to maintain its unity. In the 1700s and 1800s, Masonic dress incorporated elements of contemporary fashion, assuring members that Freemasonry was a group of genteel men focused on ideals and self-improvement. Later, the meaning of Masonic costume evolved. Regalia based on centuries-old fashion communicated that the wearer knight templar

was part of a sartorial brotherhood stretching back many years.

While debate has continued on aspects of the Knight Templar uniform ever since 1859, the basic uniform has remained largely the same. The chapeau and sash have become a type of “fossilized fashion.” Now members think of this regalia as traditional and greet any change with resistance. It continues to allow members to identify themselves and to inspire pride in their brotherhood.

Aimee E. Newell, Ph.D., is the Director of Collections at the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, in Lexington, Massachusetts. If you have objects that you would like to donate to the Museum, please contact her at anewell@monh.org or 781-457-4144. To learn more about the *Inspired by Fashion* exhibition and the Museum, visit our website, www.nationalheritagemuseum.org.