

Masonic Origins - The Wayfarer

by **Sir Knight Michael S. Franck**

Masonic scholars continue to research historical documents that provide a glimpse or purpose of the fraternity's true origin. The intention of this discourse is to call attention to a field of research that has (so far) received nominal thought by Masonic scholars: that is, the evidence found in the works of artists from the Middle Ages. Most of the information cited in this paper comes directly from the text, *A Pilgrim's Path*, written by the late John J. Robinson and published in 1993 by M. Evans and Company, Inc.

Given that a secret society did exist in medieval Britain, it would be much simpler for an artist to conceal its symbolism and allegory in his paintings than for a chronicler to attempt to conceal them in his writings. This painting is an outstanding example of such a possibility.

The *Wayfarer* was painted by Hieronymus Bosch and resides at the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam. Bosch was a Flemish painter who was born in 1450 and died in 1516. Those familiar with Bosch's work have come to expect graphic portrayals of a wide range of hideous, distorted demons. The *Wayfarer* is different in that it depicts no demons or monsters, although it is packed with symbolism, much of it Masonic in nature.

Take a good look at this painting. The traveler (wayfarer) has his left trouser leg pushed up to the knee. Some critics may point out that the trouser leg is up to accommodate a bandage, but no minor calf wound requires a slipper on one foot, with a shoe on the other.

The straps on the wayfarer's backpack are not over his shoulders where they belong. Instead, Bosch painted a strap around his upper arms, binding him like a Masonic cable-tow. The feather we might expect to find in his hat is not there. Bosch has replaced it with a plumb bob, another Masonic symbol.

Why is the man carrying his hat in his hand, rather than conveniently wearing it on his head? Bosch may have wanted his hood ready to pull down over his face to "hoodwink" him, a word that suggests that this is the way a man was blindfolded in ancient Masonic initiation. It was a common practice at that time and was incorporated into the language for future ages in "to pull the wool over his eyes."

Ahead of the traveler is a gate with a strange brace. Everyone who knows anything about wooden farm gates knows that the brace goes from one corner to the diagonally opposite corner, creating immovable triangles. The brace on Bosch's gate rises above the top rail, and then comes back down to the corner. This produces a craftsman's square on top of the gate.

Now consider the painting as a whole. The traveling man is moving from left to right or from west to east, leaving behind a rude, crude world. A serving maid lounges in the doorway of a decrepit tavern, holding a pitcher, while a customer kisses her, holding his hand on her breast. Around the corner, a man is urinating against the wall. In the courtyard, pigs feed at a trough, while an angry dog with a spiked collar is crouched, deciding whether or not to attack.

Within a few steps the wayfarer will pass through the gate of the square and enter a landscape of peace and plenty (beauty), as symbolized by the placid milk cow. With mental fortitude (strength), the traveler walks under a tree with a perched owl, the medieval symbol of wisdom. In a backward or reverse retrospect, the wayfarer is about to enter the realm of wisdom, strength and beauty-known as the triads or "lesser lights" included in the moral teachings of Masonry.

The final question in this discourse is one of motivation. To have known the Masonic symbols before 1717 (if indeed they existed in his time), Bosch would have to have been a Masonic initiate. Therefore, it is likely that the painter was attracted to, and invited into, a secret society dedicated to protecting religious dissidents from the wrath of the church. Also, Bosch was known to have been a member of a religious fraternity frowned upon by the church. His cynical portrayals of drunken, carousing monks and nuns indicate a man angry at the church, especially in view of several condemnations of his work as heretical.

Some critics may argue that the Masonic symbols in this painting are all merely coincidences. If so, this is the most incredible 30 collection of Masonic coincidences that we may ever expect to see assembled in a single work. If, however, the symbols are not there coincidentally, then this painting provides the very first graphic evidence of the existence of Masonic symbolism over five hundred years ago, in the late fifteenth century.

Within twelve months of Bosch's death in 1516, the great Protestant religious movement in Europe was launched when the Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, nailed his Theses to the great door of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg.

In conclusion, Masonic research is in many ways an unfinished temple of its own. One can only encourage those Masons who approach the historical mysteries of Masonry with the conviction that the answers must be somewhere and wish them success. We all await that inconvertible, documented proof that will solve the great mystery of how it all began and why.

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