

A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

John W. Bizzack, Master, Lexington Lodge No.1

If there is any doubt about the fact that Freemasonry is intended to be an education and philosophical society, all one must do is look closely at what we are instructed in our Fellow Craft degree about the 7 Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Highly regarded in all past cultures and civilizations is the characteristic of virtue. Universally, virtue thought of as morality, integrity, dignity, rectitude, honor, decency, respectability, worthiness, and purity. We are taught that there is a path to a better life and becoming better men through the pursuit of virtue. The lessons and reminders pointing to that path may be found in the examples of good parenting, organized religions, civic clubs, foundations, youth groups, and altruistic giving. In Freemasonry, we find the thread of virtue weaving all our profound lessons together through symbols and allegories. In Freemasonry, we value and embrace the visual lessons of virtue and find art as a source of those lessons.

A piece of art is not made arbitrarily, but rather someone put in effort and time to make something with a meaning to try and elicit either a response or provide an outlook. A complex idea can be conveyed with just a single picture. A picture can convey its meaning or essence more effectively than a description of it.

Tonight, we'll look at three pieces of art. There's about 2,000 words or so in this presentation, but what you interpret and get from seeing the pictures you'll view this evening is what is important.

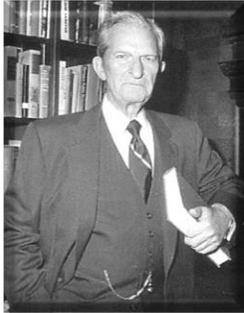
Hieronymus Bosch was an Early Flemish painter. His work is known for its fantastic imagery, detailed landscapes, and illustrations of religious concepts and narratives. Within his lifetime his work was collected in the Netherlands, Austria, and Spain, and widely copied, especially his macabre and nightmarish depictions of Hell.



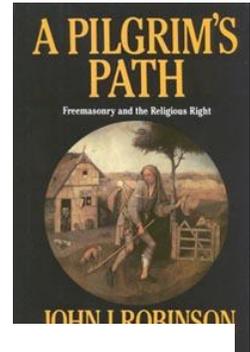
Little is known of Bosch's life, though there are some records. He is believed to be born in 1450. He never dated his painting. He left no letters or diaries. Nothing is known about his personality or the meaning of his art. Around twenty-five of his paintings are known to exist.

His art is interpreted as pessimistic and fantastical in style and has cast a wide influence on northern art of the 16th century. His paintings have been difficult to translate from a modern point of view; attempts to associate instances of modern sexual imagery with fringe sects or the occult have largely failed. Today he is seen as a hugely individualistic painter with deep insight into humanity's desires and deepest fears.

Bosch's bizarre art was created during a period marked by religious decline in Europe, so in earlier centuries it was often believed this art was inspired by medieval heresies and obscure hermetic practices. Others thought that his work was created merely to titillate and amuse. While the art of the older masters was based in the physical world of everyday experience, Bosch confronts his viewer with, in the words of the art historian Walter Gibson, "a world of dreams [and] nightmares in which forms seem to flicker and change before our eyes."



Masonic writer, John J. Robinson, from Carroll County, Kentucky, introduced a Bosch painting to the Masonic world when *The Wayfarer*, (circa 1500), appeared on the cover of his 1993 book, *The Pilgrim's Path*. The book addresses the schism between Freemasonry and the religious right in the United States and dissects many unfounded arguments of anti-Masons on the fringe right in America. He also offers his interpretation of *The Wayfarer* creating a Masonic connection to the art that



remains debatable today.

In 1990, Robinson's first book, *Born in Blood* makes an occasionally lively and interesting case for the medieval Knights Templars as the originators of the secretive worldwide society of Freemasons. However, while his book has many positive things to say about Freemasonry, the basic thesis is seriously flawed, thus discredited as a reliable citation of the history of Freemasonry, much less the Knights Templars.¹ Robinson was not a Freemason



¹ John M. Hamill, *Born in Blood, The Lost Secrets of Freemasonry* by John J. Robinson, London, Century, 1989, (as noted in Hamill's review: *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, vol 104 (1991). Frederick Smyth, ed. ISBN: 0 907655 21 1. pp. 239-40. Also see Wallace McLeod's review in *The Royal Arch Mason Magazine*, J. E. Marsengill, ed. Trenton, Missouri, USA. Summer 1990, vol. 16, No. 10. pp. 303-04. Cf.: "The Knights Templar in Scotland, The Creation of a

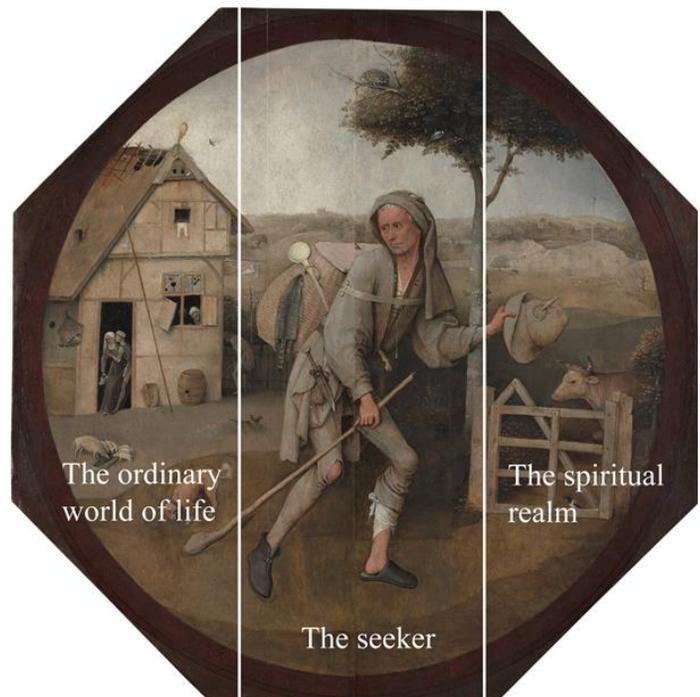
when he wrote *Born in Blood* but later became one based on what he had found after examining the claims of anti-Masons in *The Pilgrim's Path*.

What Robinson did manage to give Freemasonry with *The Pilgrim's Path* is a serious reason to think – and to think not just in terms of what we believe our symbols mean, but the fact that many of our symbols have been around for centuries – well before speculative Freemasonry was organized.

Tonight, our discussion is not about either book, but the artwork on *The Pilgrim's Path*.

Let's consider what Robinson notes in his book about Bosche's painting.

- The traveling man is moving from left to right or from west to east,
- He is leaving behind a rude, crude world.
- Walking away from a decrepit, decaying tavern representing the life and circumstances of poor values and debauchery, all because he has pulled back a hoodwink that covers his head, so, now he now sees “light.”
- A serving maid holding a pitcher – presumably containing wine or liquor.
- She lounges in the doorway of a while a customer kisses her, holding his hand on her breast.
- Around the corner, a man is urinating against the wall without regard for modesty, respect for his surroundings or sanitation.
- In the courtyard, pigs feed at a trough while an angry dog wearing a spiked collar is crouched, deciding whether 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 & perceived sign of evil in other circles (note the owl is perched on a tree on a fence line suggesting man has a choice).
- One slipper is on his left foot.
- The left leg of his pants is rolled up over his calf.
- The strap of his pack suggests a cable tow



Myth" by Robert L.D. Cooper, *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, vol. 115 (2002) London: Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, 2003. pp. 94-152.

- A plumb is stuck in his hat
- 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.

As Robinson suggests, each observation seems to have Masonic overtones. However, we must weigh the painting against Bosche's other work, the work of his contemporaries and iconography and symbolism as it existed at the time the paint was drying.

For example, the square, compasses, plumb line, and beehive all make an appearance and often used by artists to give visual representations of human virtues, judgment. One such was represented in *Jcoriologia* by a man trying to sit on a rainbow while holding the square, rule, compasses, and plumb line painted in 1360.

In explaining the symbolism, art scholars tell us wrote that "the instruments denote Discourse, and Choice, Ingenuity should make of Methods to understand, and judge of anything.

The simple fact remains that the symbols we use in Freemasonry are not exclusive to Freemasonry.

The Wayfarer does not present a compelling argument for a Masonic connection – but it does present a visually persuasive argument that remind us how virtues have always been more highly regarded and through them we find a path to a better life and being a better man.

Bosch's work has been analyzed by several art historians over the years who offer a variety of interpretations.

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*.

When Christ was making his way to Calvary, a Jew named Cartaphilus who was a shoemaker struck him and told him to move quicker – as a result, he was condemned to wander the earth until the return to earth of the Messiah. 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 to walk the earth until the return of Christ. 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

The other work is *Keep within the Compass*.

In contrast to *The Wayfarer* and *Melencolia I*, this art is clearly Masonic,

Keep within the Compass is a 1784 hand colored etching and engraving by Dighton Robert and hangs in the Victoria Albert Museum, London, at The Bridgeman Art Library. Dighton, a London portrait painter, printmaker, and caricaturist, was the founder of a dynasty of artists who followed in his footsteps. He is regarded today as one of the most talented social caricaturists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

There is no record of Dighton being a Freemason. Importantly, it must be remembered that Freemasonry was not the originator of the popular term *Keep Within the Compass*. The phrase and is recorded in many publications as early as 1619.

Regardless, Dighton's print has been assumed over the centuries to have been inspired by Freemasonry. The print is indeed a testament to the power of the message found in the lessons of our Craft - the lesson of what befalls a man if he does not circumscribe his desires and keeps within the compass, and his rewards if he does.

The symbology in his engraving clearly tells us to live morally in accordance with a humble lifestyle based on the Ten Commandments. Inside the circle is inscribed: *Keep within the compass and you shall be sure, to avoid many troubles others endure.*



In addition, a compass is inside the circle arching over the figure of a young man standing in a rural landscape. He points with his left hand to sacks full of guineas at his feet. In the background is a harvest scene (left), a stream with a water-wheel (right), and in the distance a church (right), and windmill (left). Beneath the circle, 'Industry Produceth Wealth'.

In the four corners of the oblong outside the circle are scenes showing the fatal results of an unrestrained life. (1) In the upper left corner, a gambler is seated by a circular table on which are cards, dice, and an empty money bag; he puts his hand to his forehead with a distraught expression. On the wall behind his head hang two pistols and through a window is seen a body hanging from a gibbet. (2) In the upper right corner, a courtesan robs a young man who is in a drunken sleep; bottles and glasses are on a table. (3) In the lower left corner, a ship drives upon rocks. (4) In the lower right corner three prisoners are seen through a barred window; on the wall is a pair of shackles

CLOSING

Complex ideas can indeed be conveyed with just a picture – an image, a symbol. Our lodge is full of all three.

When we bother to stop, examine, and study them, whole lessons come to mind – or should.

We often give tours to visitors and other Masons here at lodge. We show them relics, paintings, aprons, regalia, pictures, and our many symbols with which we are familiar.

We get used to seeing them and sometimes forget the profound teachings behind them. But each one offers and is worth a thousand words – and those thousand words all lead to the concept of virtue and point to a path we've all chosen to take of our own free will and accord in our collective and individual labors to become better men.

I hope you'll pause later tonight or the next time you are here and look at the thousands of words we see throughout our lodge.