



MASONIC PLAQUE IN THE FORM OF A ROYAL ARCH TRACING BOARD

Artist unidentified

Probably Natick, Massachusetts; 1899

Wood with printed and painted paper; 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 31 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 15 $\frac{1}{16}$ "

Gift of the Hirschhorn Foundation, 1997.6.4

Photo by David Stansbury, Springfield, Massachusetts

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Masons trace the roots of their secret society to the building of Solomon's Temple, though it is more likely that the organization arose out of practices of medieval stonemasons' guilds. Modern Freemasonry dates back to seventeenth-century England, and its presence in America was well established by the time of the American Revolution. Freemasonry developed a complex symbolic language intended to be understood only by its initiates. Many Americans were suspicious of secret societies such as the Masons, which they considered anti-egalitarian and threatening.

This plaque is in the form of a Master's chart, also called a carpet or tracing board, and employs a system of symbols to illustrate Masonic precepts. It includes several references to Solomon's Temple and Royal Arch Masonry, such as the triangle and circle enclosing a Tau Cross composed of three Ts. Also visible, in a series of letters surrounding the compass in the arch's keystone, is a mnemonic device associated with Royal Arch Masonry's Mark Master degree. The ascending letters on the ladder stand for "faith," "hope," and "charity." This type of chart was probably made for display in a member's home as a token of pride and prestige.

RESOURCES

American Folk Art Museum:

www.folkartmuseum.org

Beresniak, Daniel. *Symbols of Freemasonry*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Hamilton, John D. *Material Culture of the American Freemasons*. Lexington, Mass.: Museum of Our National Heritage in association with University Press of New England, 1994.

Hollander, Stacy C., and Brooke Davis Anderson. *American Anthem: Masterworks from the American Folk Art Museum*. New York: American Folk Art Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Mühlberger, Richard. *American Folk Marquetry: Masterpieces in Wood*. New York: Museum of American Folk Art, 1998.

Tabbert, Mark A. *American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building Communities*. New York: National Heritage Museum in association with New York University Press, 2005.

A SECRET WORLD OF SYMBOLS

QUESTIONS FOR CAREFUL LOOKING

- What is going on in this picture?
- What symbols can we find?
- What patterns do you notice?
- What can we say about the way this was made?
- Do you get a sense of space or depth? How is this sense created?
- What can we say about the place depicted in this object?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- What purpose do you think this object was meant to serve? Who do you think it was made for, and what function do you think it served?
- The arch and columns in the center of the image are likely references to Solomon's Temple, to which many Freemasons claim to trace their roots. How does the architecture in the plaque help define its composition?
- The *Masonic Plaque* incorporates myriad symbols, some of which are readily recognizable. Other symbols, though, have more obscure meanings. Which symbolic elements are familiar to you? Which are unfamiliar? What do you think the unfamiliar ones might represent? Why would the fraternal order develop a secret system of symbols?
- Many Masonic symbols are derived from the tools and practices of stonemasonry. How might these tools have been used originally, and how do you think the meanings given to these tools has been transformed or elevated in this object?
- Scholars have noted the striking geometry in the *Masonic Plaque*. What role does the careful geometry play in the composition of this piece, and what impact does it have on your overall interpretation of the object?

QUESTIONS FOR CONTEXT

- Who are the Freemasons, and what cultural influence have they had in American history? Where do we encounter Masonic symbols in everyday life?
- How can symbolic visual languages be embedded in a work of art? What symbolism do you find in the *Masonic Plaque*?
- Are there other fraternal or secret societies that have had a significant impact on American culture? How have these organizations affected different areas of the culture, and how are they depicted in popular media?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- Have students research the Freemasons in the United States and the society's cultural and political influences. Questions to consider include: Why have the Freemasons created a

symbolic language? What is happening with the Freemasons today? How has the organization changed?

- Ask students to create a plaque in geometric code that reflects their culture or community.
- Have students reinterpret a story they have read, using the *Masonic Plaque* and its coded language as inspiration to create a visual narrative using painting, drawing, or paper collage techniques. Ask students to incorporate their own symbolism and geometry into their designs, developing a symbol key to accompany the piece.

