

# TOKENS OF UNWRITTEN LIVES: THE FOLK AND POPULAR ART OF FRATERNITY



**Outfit of the Ancient Order of Foresters**

*(Imaged used with kind permission of Carrow House Costume and Textile Study Centre Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service)*

Millions of people once belonged to trade unions, benefit societies, and fraternal associations such as the Freemasons, the Ancient Order of Foresters and the Oddfellows. They chose to mark their membership of these groups by the creation and display of certificates and objects that signified their allegiance. These items give us an indication of their tastes and an insight into their lives.

THE LIBRARY AND MUSEUM OF FREEMASONRY  
FREEMASONS' HALL  
GREAT QUEEN STREET  
LONDON  
WC2B 5AZ  
[www.freemasonry.london.museum](http://www.freemasonry.london.museum)



## CALLIGRAPHY AND ILLUMINATION

Calligraphy is the art of writing. Sometimes lodges would use calligraphy to illuminate their by-laws and minute books. Even though they would not have been seen publicly, these important documents were celebrated with ornate lettering and detailed illustrations, perhaps out of pride for the lodge. It was a time-consuming task. Lettering would have been created using a dip pen, with a reservoir of ink in the nib capable of only a few lines. The development and practising of fonts was a popular hobby and created great potential variation in the text. At its extreme, calligraphy turned words into art objects, sometimes at the expense of legibility.



*Illuminated frontispiece of the minute book of Empire Lodge, No. 2108, 1885 (Image used with kind permission of the Lodge)*

## ENGRAVING AND CHROMO-LITHOGRAPHY

When someone joined a masonic lodge, they were issued with a certificate as proof of their membership. Membership certificates were important documents, which could be kept on one's person as proof of allegiance to the organisation. Masonic membership certificates were first issued by individual lodges, but in the mid-eighteenth century the Moderns Grand Lodge, swiftly followed by the Antients Grand Lodge, began issuing certificates centrally. Other fraternal organisations also issued such certificates.

These certificates were often copperplate engraved, which required great skill; the picture is created in reverse, and the illusion of shading is produced by 'hatching' or 'cross hatching' - lines engraved closely together or crossing. The final print is made by inking and cleaning the plate so that only the engraved grooves hold the ink. Sometimes colour effects are introduced by differential inking. Brightly coloured certificates to be displayed with pride in the home could be produced by chromo-lithography. This was a process where a drawing was made using a greasy ink on a 'litho stone', usually limestone, bonded to it using gum Arabic. The stone was then soaked in water and a second greasy ink was applied. The water soaked stone rejected the ink and only the drawing took it up. After printing the stone was cleaned and re-inked. A separate stone



was required for every colour used, which was unlimited in theory. It was a process that allowed multicoloured images to be produced for the first time in quantity, and at an affordable price.



Left: Engraved membership certificate presented to Adam Armstrong by Jacob's Lodge, No. 570, 1806

Right: Chromo-lithographic membership certificate, of the Brighton Agency of the Tunbridge Wells & South Eastern Counties Equitable Friendly Society, presented to Albert Scriven, 1898

## SCRIMSHAW

Scrimshaw is the name given to art created by engraving or carving the remains of marine mammals, although it is often applied to these techniques executed on other materials, such as cow horns or coconut. It became popular in the early nineteenth century and was traditionally carried out by sailors. While often functional objects such as cups or powder horns, scrimshaw items were highly decorated, commonly depicting trade and exploration. They were also used to show what organisations a person belonged to and what allegiances they held, such as freemasonry or the Oddfellows. They would be engraved or carved with symbols that fellow members of the same organisations might recognise.



Scrimshaw horn, c.1810, made or owned by John Patrick (inscribed) of the 94th Foot Regiment. On one side is inscribed masonic symbolism (shown) and on the other is a soldier approaching a fortification, possibly a reference to the attack on the Danish colonial fort at Tranquebar in 1801

## **PAINTING**

Fraternal associations produced a variety of painted material. Painted tracing boards had symbolic and ritualistic significance. Painted chairs or coats of arms may have been elements of an organisation's furniture. Individuals also commissioned portraits of themselves in their fraternal regalia.

Painting required some skill. In the 1800s it often required you to know how to mix and make your own paints and to prepare the wooden panel or canvas. As such, fine artists could command high fees. It was common for the less well off to go to coach painters or sign writers. They produced coats of arms, pub signs and all forms of painted decoration. Their skills came through an apprenticeship as a craft painter and decorator, or coach painter. None would have had the formal training of proportion or perspective, but they possessed a general artistic competence. The work they produced is often very professional at first sight, but a closer inspection may reveal mistakes in proportion or perspective. In many cases this adds to their charm rather than diminishing it.



*Portrait of a lodge master, artist and sitter unknown. The painting dates to c.1810, estimated by the style of his Past Master's jewel*

## **TEXTILES AND REGALIA**

Most fraternal associations wear regalia. They also had legends of their origins, which were sometimes shown on their regalia. The Biblical story of Adam and Eve suited a range of fraternal associations. The Free Gardeners used the Biblical Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve as the first gardeners. The aprons of the United Female Friendly Society bore fig leaves, and some Oddfellow aprons had the scene of Eve feeding Adam the forbidden fruit of knowledge.





*Apron of the Free Gardeners. Although naïve in style, it is relatively expensive in its manufacture, painted on silk and with gold leaf detailing.*

Aprons and other regalia exhibit a wide range of decoration and technique from printing to individual painting, and the application of braids, trimmings and embroidery. They reflect the prosperity, or otherwise, of their owners and the organisations to which they belonged. The earlier aprons reflect the fact that labour was cheap but materials frequently expensive.

## **HOMEWARES**

Fraternity also resulted in a wealth of personal or decorative items for the home. Ceramic jugs or teapots could display a masonic image on one side and a non-masonic image, perhaps displaying a contemporary event, on the other. The way the item was displayed might depend on the nature of the guest.



*Lustreware jug, c.1840s. One side of the jug (left) is a faux coat of arms, based on farming implements. The other side of the jug (right) shows a masonic temple and symbolism*

## THE OLD CHARGES

The Old Charges first appeared in 1390 and were documents that sought to legitimise the right of stonemasons to assemble, such right having been put under threat by new labour laws. They attempted to demonstrate legitimacy with a history dating back to the Old Testament, the building of Solomon's Temple and noting the patronage of such figures as St. Alban and King Athelstan. The Old Charges reappeared two centuries later after a new round of labour legislation. Some of the manuscripts are scrolls that were read to, and then learnt by, new members before their initiation. They usually take the following form: a prayer, followed by the legendary history of masonry and a set of charges or rules of the *Society of Free Masons*. They often finish with an oath. To indicate the importance of these manuscripts many have illuminated headings, often with a coat of arms and a range of heraldic devices. They are sometimes the work of a skilled artisan but others have the feel of a gifted amateur.



Haddon MS [Manuscript] dated 1723 and named after James Haddon, a former owner. It features the coat of arms of George I, flanked by the arms of the Masons' Company on the left hand side and the arms of the Rutherford family on the right

**History is written by those who have the power to do it, but it is created by all of us.**