

Freemason Symbols and Their Masonic Symbolism

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The Square and Compasses is the single most universally identifiable symbol of Freemasonry.

Due to slight Masonic jurisdictional differences around the world, this symbol does not always look exactly the same to all Freemasons.

Some jurisdictions call this symbol the Square and Compass, (non-plural) and a few jurisdictions omit the "G" at its center.

But, no matter its slightly different look, all Freemasons are in unison as to what this symbol means to them within the fraternity.

Speculative Masonic Symbolism of the Square and Compasses

In speculative Freemasonry, this emblematic symbol is used in Masonic ritual.

The Square is an emblem of virtue in which we must "**square our actions by the square of virtue with all mankind**".

The Compasses exemplify our wisdom of conduct,... the strength to "circumscribe our desires and keep our passions within due bounds".

When these 2 Masonic tools are placed together with God (the Creator) as our central focal point... (just as King Solomon built God's Temple, first... and then built his house around it), peace and harmony is the result.

The Information below may be found in Mackey's Revised Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Volume 2, Page 963, 1929.

A Short History About the Square and Compasses

THE SQUARE...Morality

THE COMPASS...Boundaries

Trying Square: In the operative stone mason era, the 90 degree angle of the square was a necessary tool used to test the accuracy of the sides of a stone to ascertain that the stone's angles matched the square's "true" right angle.

Morality: In speculative Freemasonry, the square is a symbol of morality.

Official Masonic Usage:

1. *It is one of the 3 Great Lights (the Square, the Compass and the Holy Book).*
2. *It is one of the working tools of a Fellow Craft.*
3. *It is the official emblem of the Master of the lodge.*

In each of its above roles, it inculcates the repeated lesson of morality, truthfulness and honesty.

Common Usage: The square is so universally accepted that it has found its way into colloquial language with which we communicate on a daily basis. We have all heard the sayings: "Getting a square deal; Are you on the square? and Squaring off".

While the specific date with which the Masonic square became an official Masonic symbol is not known, it was one of the primary tools which an operative mason used in his craft.

An Antique Square: In 1830, an architect who was rebuilding an ancient bridge called Baal Bridge near Limerick, Ireland removed the foundation stone of the bridge and found a much eaten away old brass square. On the surfaces of its 2 legs, was the following inscription:

"I will strive to live - with love and care - upon the level - by the square." It was dated 1517.

1725: In one of the very earliest catechisms (rituals) we find these words:

Q: *"How many make a lodge?"*

A: *God and the Squares, with 5 or 7 right or perfect Masons."*

1880: Excerpt from a speech delivered by Brother Herbert A. Geles, Worshipful Master of Ionic Lodge No. 1781, at Amoy, entitled "Freemasonry in China"

"From time immemorial, we find the Square and Compasses used by Chinese writers to symbolize precisely the same phases of moral conduct as in our system of Freemasonry.

The earliest passage known to Albert Mackey which bears upon the subject is to be found in the Book of History, embracing the period reaching from the 24th to the 7th century before Christ. It is there, in an account of a military expedition that we read:

"Ye officers of government, apply the Compasses!"

In another part of the same records, a Magistrate is spoken of as:

"A man of the level, or the level man."

481 B.C.: The public discourses of Confucius provide us with several Masonic allusions of a more or less definite character. When recounting his own degrees of moral progress in life, the Master tells us that only at 75 years of age could he venture to follow the inclinations of his heart, without fear of transgressing the limits of the Square."

Circa 281 B.C.: In the works of Mencius, a follower of Confucius, is a fuller and more impressive Masonic phraseology:

Book vi: *"The Master mason in teaching his apprentices, makes use of the Square and the Compasses. Ye who are engaged in the pursuit of wisdom must also make use of the Square and the Compasses."*

300-400 Years Before Christ: In the Great Learning, Chapter 10, believed to have been written circa 300-400 B.C., we read that a man should abstain from doing unto others what he would not they should do unto him; "this," adds the writer, "is called the principle of acting on the Square."

Of course, we are familiar with this statement today, as the Golden Rule, as also found in the Bible.

Possibly most interesting of all is the fact that the symbolism recorded of the Square permeates equally so many languages across the world, (sic: over nearly 2400 years) and, in each of them, the Square has preserved its original symbolism...as the symbol of morality."

End of Albert Mackey's dissertation on the Square and Compasses.

Tools of the Craft:

Historically, both the square and compasses are architect's tools to create true and perfect lines and angles. Operative stone masons used them as the tools of their trade. Like most tradesmen throughout history, operative stone masons began their career as an entered apprentice under the supervision of a Master mason.

From Entered Apprentice to Master Mason: After several years, if their work was pleasing to the Master stone mason, the entered apprentice was elevated to the title of a Fellow Craft.

More years passed and if the Fellow Craft's work was deemed acceptable to the Master, he was allowed to begin work upon his Master's piece (the word "Masterpiece" is another colloquialism we now commonly use in our everyday speech).

Upon the Fellow Craft's passing this final test, he was raised to the degree of Master Mason of the Craft.

Wisdom: Like men, buildings are not erected overnight and the knowledge of any craft takes time to hone. Each building must have a sturdy foundation with which to build upon.

Wisdom is the learned ability to utilize the accumulated knowledge of enlightenment, experience and intuitive understanding coupled with the capacity to apply them with good judgment toward achieving a prudent course of action.

Strength and Beauty: Operatively, the Square and Compasses were tools used to build strong foundations and to craft geometrically and precision cut stones, one atop another in symmetrical form to create a useful edifice (large and imposing building) which was both sturdy, durable and rock-solid against the elements (strength) as well as visually pleasing (beauty) to those who beheld it.

A Masonic trestle board is a design board for the Master Workman (Architect) to draw his plans and designs upon to give the workmen an outline of the work to be performed. In today's terms, we might call it a blueprint.

It is one of the 3 Movable jewels.

A trestle board is a framework consisting of (usually 3) vertical, slanted supports (or legs) with one or more horizontal crosspieces on which to hang or display an item. Today, it is better known as an "easel".

Some jurisdictions around the world call it a tracing board. It would be somewhat of a "circular logic" task to argue the difference, as, while neither can be fully proven (in historical writings), the "Tracing board" may very well have preceded the use of the word "Trestleboard" because lodges in Europe, use the word "Tracing Board".

Hiram's Tracing Board: Hiram Abif's tracing board is believed to have been made of wood, covered with a coating of wax. Each day he would draw his Master architect's measurements and symbols into the wax in order to instruct his Master Masons of the work that was to be accomplished.

At the end of the day, he would simply scrape off the wax and pour a new layer of hot wax onto the board to ready it for the next day's work.

Masonic Tracing Board: Much later, in the days where lodge was held in secret areas and on hills and valleys, once lodge was in session, the Tyler would draw an oblong (rectangular) or oblong square depiction into the dirt that represented the form of the lodge.

Again, onto that tracing board was drawn the architect's plan...the working tools in the degree that was to be worked.

Masonic Trestle Board: Through the years, the Masonic Tracing Board progressed to charcoal or chalk on the floor of taverns where lodges were held back in the 1700s. After the lecture, the Stewards or the Entered Apprentice, as a lesson in secrecy, would get a mop and bucket and remove all trace of these drawings.

This, obviously, was a somewhat tedious and messy procedure, so cloths or rugs were created which could be laid onto the floor and simply folded up when the lecture was complete.

Later, these cloths (or rugs) were placed onto a table. As time passed, they were finally hung onto an easel...(a trestle board) much like a drawing board at a construction site where each workman could receive clear instruction as to what his specific participation entailed.

When the team's work was completed, it was obvious that each Master Mason not only understood their specific part in the undertaking, but how their part (no matter how small), contributed to the construction of the entire edifice.

The meaning of the words "Nothing further remains to be done, according to ancient custom, except to disarrange our emblems" is a reference to the now antiquated use of

these trestleboards during which the dirt on the ground was erased or the chalk marks on the floor of these lodges was mopped or scrubbed, to leave no trace of the form of the Lodge or the contents drawn thereon.

The reason why our lines of travel are at right angles within the lodge and thus the reason that we "square" the lodge is a "throwback" to the antiquity of the ritual.

If the brethren were to walk atop the markings made in the dirt on hill and vale; atop the chalk on the floor of the taverns; or tread upon and thus soil the cloths or rugs used to provide the workings of that degree, the message of that lecture which was being worked could be partially or fully destroyed.

Therefore, "Squaring the Lodge" in a semi-military-like precision, goes back many centuries as the means of preserving the ritual and the degrees being worked so as not to destroy the symbolism of their markings before their usefulness on that day has been completed.