



Paper

## Origins of the Tracing Boards

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Origin of the Tracing Board.

### **Summary**

An explanation of the origin of the Tracing Board and the use of pictures to communicate ideas and meaning.

### **Keywords**

Tracing, Board, History, Furniture

## Origins of the Tracing Boards

We can find many justifications for the use of Tracing Boards in Masonic Ritual. There are accounts of early Freemasons tracing symbols onto the floors of their Lodge rooms, a practice that became systemised, and then embellished to produce some examples of truly outstanding artistic achievement.

But why trace anything at all? Since prehistoric times, we have attempted to record visual images of our surroundings and of our relationship to the world around us, that both we and others could relate to. When one of our prehistoric ancestors depicted a bison on the wall of his cave, his companions may have been astonished to see, in the image, a representation of a creature normally found outside in the hunting grounds, and may indeed have been frightened by it, assuming it had the same qualities as the animal. Later, we learned to illustrate the non-material aspects of our existence, such as evil, goodness, joy and fear.

We learned the value of tracing out pictures to communicate ideas to our companions and to plan designs. Perhaps a plan for a battle, a settlement, or a sketch of a building. On a spiritual level, we learned to comprehensibly render images in both sculpture and painting that would assist us in our devotions to God. We created striking images of holy men and women, saints and even God, across all religions. Our attention was focused on gaining access to heaven, and ultimately to God himself.

According to Professor David Fontana: *'the symbolic nature of icons can help to access progressively deeper levels of the unconscious, ultimately assisting the mediator to experience a mystical sense of oneness with the ultimate unity from which the cosmos in all its manifold forms arises'*.

When our Masonic forebears decided to adapt the plans of buildings into allegories as a plan for moral, intellectual and spiritual development, the possibilities became boundless. A pillar became not only a support for a building, but also a support for moral, social and spiritual endeavours.

The ceiling became a canvas on which to depict the heavens. It became possible to depict a carved stone as representing a stage in man's own inner development. The placing of one stone on another became an allegory for the construction of more than a physical temple, for the building of our own characters and through that, the building of a temple to humanity and of humanity.

In this tracery, we were able to portray other divine and spiritual values. Jacob's Ladder was depicted as connecting heaven and earth, with the blazing star at the summit indicating God, and the ladder symbolising our ascent to heaven.

There is ample evidence that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, much instruction was imparted to Candidates, not so much in the course of the Degree ceremony, but afterwards, in preparation for the next Degree. However, this now seems to have fallen by the wayside. This is the only way we can explain why the Candidate in the First-Degree is not instructed that the three grand principles on which Freemasonry was founded are brotherly love, relief and truth. The Entered Apprentice only discovers this important information when he learns the questions leading to the Second-Degree. Similarly, although the peculiar objects of the Second-Degree are the hidden mysteries of nature and science, the Fellow Craft has to wait for this revelation until he studies the questions leading to the Third-Degree.

It is clear that we are missing something today. Hence, the Tracing Boards are used to attempt to fill in some of the missing features and to complete the landscape.

The early practice of laying out the symbols for study in Lodges seems to have been in the form of drawings on the floor made with chalk or charcoal. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, several exposures of Freemasonry were published, one of which contains the following passage: *'The candidate is learnt the Step, or how to advance to the Master upon the Drawing on the Floor, which in some Lodges resembles the Grand Building termed a Mosaic Palace, and is described with the utmost exactness. The Ceremony being ended the new made Member is obliged to take a Mop out of a Pail of Water brought for that Purpose, and rub out the Drawing if it is done with Chalk or Charcoal'*. In other words, they were exceedingly careful that the images they drew on the floor of the Lodge should not be seen by outsiders.



**First-Degree Tracing Board by John Harris c,1825  
Courtesy of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry**

To sum up, Freemasonry is about rendering in symbol and allegory that which words alone cannot render. A visual image gives us a way of using our own insight to decode the message. The Tracing Boards exist for this purpose, derived from their original function of laying out the plan of the building, but they have developed into a means for us to lay out messages, and then to profit, not just from contemplation of their meanings, but by their application in our everyday lives.

##END##

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## Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
  - Followed by 'any questions'
  - As a precursor to a discussion (*in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself*)
  - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary.

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (*in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand*).

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*.  
Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

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