

Eye in the Pyramid

By: S. Brent Morris, P.M.

In, at times, a strongly worded article Dr. S. Morris, a member and Past Master of Patmos Lodge #70, Ellicott City, Maryland, has “set the record straight” on the myth that the Great Seal of the United States represents a Masonic symbol. The facts are clearly presented, together with several examples of the use of the “All Seeing Eye” prior to any known Masonic use. This straightforward article is being presented as a STB so that Freemasons may have an answer when the question is asked “Is the Seal of the United States a Masonic symbol?”

Historians must be cautious about many well-known “facts.” George Washington chopped down a cherry tree when a boy and confessed the deed to his father. Abner Doubleday invented the game of baseball. Freemasons inserted some of their emblems (chief among them the eye in the pyramid) into the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States. These historical “facts” are widely popular, commonly accepted, and equally false.

The eye in the pyramid (emblazoned on the dollar bill, no less) is often cited as “evidence” that sinister conspiracies abound which will impose a “New World Order” on an unsuspecting populace. Depending on whom you hear it from, the Masons are planning the takeover themselves, or are working in concert with European bankers, or are leading (or perhaps being led by) the Illuminati (whoever they are). The notion of a world-wide Masonic conspiracy would be laughable, if it weren’t being repeated with such earnest gullibility by conspiracists like Pat Robertson.

Sadly, Masons are sometimes counted among the gullible who repeat the tall tale of the eye in the pyramid, often with a touch of pride. They may be guilty of nothing worse than innocently puffing the importance of their fraternity (as well as themselves), but they’re guilty nonetheless. The time has come to state the truth plainly and simply!

The Great Seal of the United States is not a Masonic emblem, nor does it contain hidden Masonic symbols.

The details are there for anyone to check, who’s willing to rely on historical fact, rather than hysterical fiction.

- Benjamin Franklin was the only Mason on the first design committee, and his suggestions had no Masonic content.
- None of the final designers of the seal were Masons.
- The interpretation of the eye on the seal is subtly different from the interpretation used by Masons.
- The eye in the pyramid is not nor has it ever been a Masonic symbol

The First Committee

On Independence Day, 1776 a committee was created to design a seal for the new American nation. The committee’s members were Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, with Pierre Du Simitiere as artist and consultant[1]. Of the four men involved, only Benjamin Franklin was a Mason, and he contributed nothing of a Masonic nature to the committee’s proposed design for a seal.

Du Simitiere, the committee’s consultant and a non-Mason, contributed several major design features that made their way into the ultimate design of the seal: ‘the shield, E Pluribus Unum, MDCCLXXVI, and the eye of providence in a triangle.’[2] The eye of providence on the seal thus can be traced, not to the Masons, but to a non-Mason consultant to the committee.

“The single eye was a well-established artistic convention for an ‘omniscient Ubiquitous Deity’ in the medallion art of the Renaissance. Du Simitiere, who suggested using the symbol, collected art books and was familiar with the artistic and ornamental devices used in Renaissance art.”[3] This was the same cultural iconography that eventually led Masons to add the all-seeing eye to their symbols.

The Second and Third Committees

Congress declined the first committees suggestions as well as those of its 1780 committee. Francis Hopkinson, consultant to the second committee, had several ideas that eventually made it into the seal: “white and red stripes with- in a blue background for the shield, a radiant constellation of thirteen stars, and an olive branch.”[4] Hopkinson’s greatest contribution to the current seal came from his layout of a 1778 50-dollar colonial note in which he used an unfinished pyramid in the design. The third and last seal committee of 1782 produced a design that finally satisfied Congress. Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, and William Barton, artist and consultant, borrowed from earlier designs and sketched what at length became the United States Seal.

The misinterpretation of the seal as a Masonic emblem may have been first introduced a century later in 1884. Harvard Professor Eliot Norton wrote that the reverse was ‘practically incapable of effective treatment; it can hardly, (however artistically treated by the designer), look otherwise than as a dull emblem of a Masonic fraternity.[5]

Interpreting the Symbol

The “Remarks and Explanations” of Thomson and Barton are the only explanation of the symbols’ meaning. Despite what anti-Masons may believe, there’s no reason to doubt the interpretation accepted by the Congress.

The Pyramid signified Strength and Duration: The Eye over it & the Motto allude to the many signal interpositions of providence in favor of the American cause.[6]

The committees and consultants who designed the great Seal of the United States contained only one Mason, Benjamin Franklin. The only possibly Masonic design element among the very many on the seal is the eye of providence, and the interpretation of it by the designers is different from that used by Masons. The eye on the seal represents an active intervention of God in the affairs of men, while the Masonic symbol stands for a passive awareness by God of the activities of men.

The first “official” use and definition of the all-seeing eye as a Masonic symbol seems to have come in 1797 with The Freemasons Monitor of Thomas Smith Webb — 14 years after Congress adopted the design for the seal. Here’s how Webb explains the symbol.

“[A]nd although our thoughts, words and actions, may be hidden from the eyes of man, yet that All-Seeing Eye, whom the Sun, Moon and Stars obey, and under whose watchful care even comets perform their stupendous revolutions, pervades the inmost recesses of the human heart, will reward us according to our merits.”[7]

The Eye in the Pyramid

Besides the subtly different interpretations of the symbol, it is notable that Webb did not describe the eye as being in a triangle. Jeremy Ladd Cross published The True Masonic Chart or Hieroglyphic Monitor in 1819, essentially an illustrated version of Webb’s Monitor. In this first “official” depiction of Webb’s symbol, Cross had illustrator Amos Doolittle depict the eye surrounded by a semicircular glory.[8]

The all-seeing eye thus appears to be a rather recent addition to Masonic symbolism. It is not found in any of the Gothic Constitutions, written from about 1390 to 1730. The eye — sometimes in a triangle, sometimes in clouds, but nearly always surrounded by a glory — was a popular Masonic decorative device in the latter half of the 18th century. Its use as a design element seems to have been an artistic representation of the omniscience of God, rather than some generally accepted Masonic symbol.

Its meaning in all cases, however, was that commonly given it by society at large — a reminder of the constant presence

of God. For example, in 1614 the frontispiece of *The History of the World* by Walter Raleigh showed an eye in a cloud labeled “Providentia” overlooking a globe. It has not been suggested that Raleigh’s story is a Masonic document despite the use of the all-seeing eye.

The eye of Providence was part of the common cultural iconography of the 17th and 18th centuries. When placed in a triangle, the eye went beyond a general representation of God to a strongly Trinitarian statement. It was during this period that Masonic ritual and symbolism evolved; and it is not surprising that many symbols common to and understood by the general society made their way into Masonic ceremonies. Masons may have preferred the triangle because of the frequent use of the number 3 in their ceremonies: three degrees, three original grand masters, three principal officers, and so on. Eventually the all-seeing eye came to be used officially by Masons as a symbol for God, but this happened towards the end of the eighteenth century, after congress had adopted the seal.

A pyramid, whether incomplete or finished, however, has never been a Masonic symbol. It has no generally accepted symbolic meaning, except perhaps permanence or mystery. The combining of the eye of providence overlooking an unfinished pyramid is a uniquely American, not Masonic, icon, and must be interpreted as its designers intended. It has no Masonic context.

Conclusion

It’s hard to know what leads some to see Masonic conspiracies behind world events, but once that hypothesis is accepted, any jot and tittle can be misinterpreted as “evidence.” The Great Seal of the United States is a classic example of such a misinterpretation, and some Masons are as guilty of the exaggeration as many anti-Masons.

The Great Seal and Masonic symbolism grew out of the same cultural milieu. While the all-seeing eye had been popularized in Masonic designs of the late eighteenth century, it did not achieve any sort of official recognition until Webb’s 1797 Monitor. Whatever status the symbol may have had during the design of the Great Seal, it was not adopted or approved or endorsed by any Grand Lodge.

The seal’s Eye of Providence and the Mason’s All Seeing Eye each express Divine Omnipotence, but they are parallel uses of a shared icon, not a single symbol.

Notes

[1] Robert Hieronimus, *America’s Secret Destiny* (Rochester, Vt.: Destiny Books, 1989), p. 48.

[2] Patterson and Dougall in Hieronimus, p. 48.

[3] Hieronimus, p. 81.

[4] Hieronimus, p. 51.

[5] Hieronimus, p. 57.

[6] C. Thomas and W. Barton in Hieronimus, p. 54.

[7] Thomas Smith Webb, *The Freemasons Monitor or Illustrations of Masonry* (Salem, Mass.: Cushing and Appleton, 1821), p. 66.

[8] Jeremy Ladd Cross, *The True Masonic Chart or Hieroglyphic Monitor*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: By the Author, 1824), plate 22.

References

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