




ENGLISH SYMBOLISM THE VEILS

In the working of the present day American Chapter, the veils and their corresponding colours i.e. (blue, purple, scarlet, and white) were taken from 18th century English Royal Arch practice.(1) However, this is not quite the case with regard to the attendant symbolism.   

The attributes of universal friendship and benevolence, unity and concord, fervency and zeal, and purity, are not ascribed to the colours, as this I seems to be a purely American understanding. The source of the English symbolism derives from Josephus, in his Jewish Antiquities.(2) “The veils too, which were composed of four things, they declared the four elements; for the fine linen was proper to signify the earth, because the flax grows out of the earth; the purple signifies the sea, because that colour is dyed by blood of a sea shell-fish; the blue is fit to signify the air; and the scarlet will naturally be an indication of fire’ “ This description parallels scripture from Exodus 38.(3) with an embellishment on the furnishings of the tabernacle, from the author.

The four elements to which Josephus alludes are from the work of the Greek scholar Plato, and are explained in the dialogue of Timeaus(4) as fire, air, water, and earth(5). During the pre-Christian epoch, the four elements represented the geometric building blocks employed by the Grand Architect in his creation of the universe, and its contents. Developed in this theory, is an elegant mathematical expression of proportion, and ratio as given by the physical form assigned to each of the bodies.

Fire (Tetrahedron) Considered the smallest, and most acute of the elements, with the greatest propensity for transport. Fire is also known as the original element, which can combine with, or solubilize the others.

Air (Octahedron) Of the second order in size, surface, and mobility. Air when divided, becomes a double volume of fire, when condensed, two volumes of fire become one volume of air; and two and a half parts of air make water.

Earth (Hexahedron) The most stable of the elements, described by the figure with the greatest mass, area, and volume. Earth, when dissolved by fire, whether acting immediately, or through the medium of air and water, is dispersed but not changed.

Water (Icosahedron) Of the third order in size and mobility. Water, when divided by fire or air, becomes one part fire and two parts air.

There remains one more Platonic body; illustrative of the universe, and without any doubt, the most valuable to the sciences of geometry and engineering design.

Universe (Dodecahedron) The sum of the four elements, an aggregate of energy and form. Representative of the signs, and degrees of the Zodiac, as well as the months, and days of the year.

The five Platonic solids are in actuality regular polyhedra, and were certainly known to the Pythagoreans, centuries earlier. The construction of the four elements is effected by the use of right triangles only. Two types are required, the isosceles triangle, which is half of a square bisected diagonally, and half of an equilateral triangle. (Fig. 1.)

Four equilateral triangles construct a regular tetrahedron, (fire) the most fundamental of the solids. Eight equilateral triangles construct a regular octahedron (air), and twenty equilateral triangles produce the icosahedron (water). A square is formed by reconstructing two isosceles triangles, and six squares form the hexahedron (earth).

Twelve pentagons compose the dodecahedron, and cannot be constructed by a combination of either type of triangle used thus far. But, may be constructed from three hundred and sixty irregular triangles.

The dodecahedron provides the correspondence, and internal consistency between the other figures. If the bodies are superimposed, the twelve vertices of the icosahedron (and six of it's sides) are on the surface of a cube; the eight vertices of this cube coincide with eight of the vertices of the dodecahedron having its side equal to that of the icosahedron. The twelve other vertices of the dodecahedron and six of its sides are situated on the surface of another, enveloping cube. Similarly, the six sides of any tetrahedron can be set as diagonals on the six faces of a cube, the four vertices of the tetrahedron coinciding with four of the vertices of the cube (the four remaining vertices of the cube and the six other diagonals producing another tetrahedron)(6) Fig. 2. Hence the reasoning behind the dodecahedron being taken as the geometrical symbol for the harmony of the whole, or cosmos.

Despite the great beauty of the dodecahedron, it is inferior to each of it's parts. Vitruvius(7) in his accounts of the principal orders of architecture describes the constructive study of the pentagon as a model of proportion. Unfortunately, the proper explanation due this mathematical marvel is beyond the scope of this work; but suffice it to say that architects ranging from Egyptians, to Da Vinci, and Christopher Wren recognized, and venerated the knowledge contained therein.

It is by reason of the afore mentioned facts not a great stretch to assume that the “Ancients”, as the sole possessors of the Royal Arch legend, also received this symbolism from their operative forerunners. Much to our loss, I fear that during the period of reconciliation, many of the speculative brethren lacked a sufficient technical understanding to preserve many of the antediluvian traditions of the craft. However, as we know, the word is not truly lost!

References

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4. The Dialogues Of Plato: B. Jowett; Charles Scribner's Sons 1887, Volume 2
5. Freemason's Book Of The Royal Arch: Bernard E. Jones; Harrap Publishing Co. 1976, pp. 196-197
6. The Geometry Of Art And Life: Matila Ghyka; Sheed & Ward Publishers 1946, pp.40-70
7. Vitruvius On Architecture: Frank Granger (Translator); Harvard University Press 1934.

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