Tracing-Boards

Some of the old chapters had, and probably may still have, tracing-boards, the idea of which came straight from Craft usage. In the old Irish chapters were boards depicting the symbols not only of the Royal Arch, but of the Craft and a number of additional degrees. It is thought that the oldest Irish floor-cloth (and the floor-cloth was in effect a tracing-board) is owned by Lurgan Lodge, then No. 394, Irish Constitution, and its chief feature is an arch.

An engraved plate dated 1755 represents a very early instance of a tracing-board displaying a Royal Arch idea. It is a curious illustration showing an arch in three stages and an indented border on a tracing-board which is in course of use by the architect.

In the Chapter of Fortitude, Edgbaston, No. 43, is a painted floor-cloth, not thought to be older than 1840, showing the signs of the zodiac, while in the Chapter of Sincerity, Taunton, No. 261, is a tracing-board, originally a cloth, dating back to the early 1800's, and displaying as one of its emblems the mariner’s compass. This last board, illustrated in a full-page plate in the author’s earlier volume, is quite outstanding; within an indented border it includes a main arch supported by two great pillars, and inside that is seen a succession of three arches, with the Sojourners at work.

A Third-degree tracing-board belonging to the Britannia Lodge, No. 139, Sheffield (started as an ‘Antients’ Lodge in 1761), presumably dating back to not earlier than the 1840's, displays the clearest possible evidence of association with the Royal Arch. Within an outline of a coffin (surmounted by a sprig of acacia) are a few bold Craft emblems and three pentalpha’s, those last probably an indication of the survival of the ‘Antients’ feeling originally in the lodge.

On old Craft tracing-boards, banners, jewels, etc., a hand holding a plumb-line is a symbol often indicating a Royal Arch connexion. It comes from the ‘Antients’ ceremony of Installation, and dates back to the time when the Past Master’s ‘Degree’ was considered an essential step to the Royal Arch. It is a matter for conjecture whether anything was contributed to this particular symbolism as a result of Galileo Galilei’s investigation of the properties of the pendulum, but it is impossible to contemplate the well-known statue of the great physicist holding a line with pendulum bob without instantly calling to mind the hand-and-plumb-line symbol to be seen on numberless tracing-boards and jewels of other days. An excellent example of a design in which the same symbol occurs is on a Royal Arch banner (1780-1800) in the masonic museum at Canterbury.

The anchor, a device common on old tracing-boards and jewels, was (and still is) a Christian emblem of eternal life, particularly so when combined with the cross.

The group of seven stars so commonly seen on old tracing-boards, jewels, and the like is inspired by the texts in Revelations II, 16; ii, 11; and iii, II, these speaking of the seven stars in the hand of Christ.

Freemasons’ Book of the Royal Arch by Bernard E. Jones