

A DOORWAY TO MASONIC SYMBOLISM: A PAIR OF DOOR KNOCKERS FROM THE WINTERTHUR COLLECTION

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The Winterthur collections are filled with objects entangled in ritual performance. Tea sets and dressing tables are the necessary accoutrements to performative rituals of gentility. Ecclesiastical silver aids in the ritual of communion. A wide array of objects such as tables, chairs, clocks, and tools can be implicated in patterns of prescribed behavior that could reasonably be called ritualistic. Among these is a pair of cast brass door knockers from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, used in a Masonic lodge (fig. 1). Outside of their original context, their status as door knockers is almost deceptive: one could easily, and reasonably, assume that they would be mounted adjacent to a front door, or perhaps on the door of a prominent Mason's house. Even examining the knockers off of their current mounting can be misleading, due to a note adhered to the reverse of one knocker (incorrectly) identifying the lodge at which they were first installed, and heavily implying an earlier origin. Like many objects, these knockers derive much of their meaning from their material, ritual, and economic context. Firsthand sources on Masonic ritual are oftentimes coy about revealing details perceived as privileged information, and secondhand research on Masonic material culture is sparse, but through these resources the knockers can be virtually reinstalled in their original context and understood as the ritually and ideologically charged objects that they were.

The pair of Masonic door knockers was donated to the Winterthur museum by Russell Ward Nadeau in 1984.¹ They are about 4.5" tall, 3" wide, and 1.5" deep. Each knocker is crowned with an open set of compasses, intersecting with an inverted square. Passing vertically through the angle of the square, in line with the joint of the compasses, is a level. Attached to the top of the level is a riveted hinge, off of which hangs the articulated part of the knocker, in the form of a gavel or stonemason's hammer, with a vertical peen that faces toward the viewer. Two columns support the level upon a rectangular base decorated with a repeating pattern of impressed squares flanking a three-tiered center projection. The head of the gavel hits the middle of these tiers when swung. The impressed squares are intended to suggest a tiled floor. The haft of the gavel is marked at quarter, half, and full inch increments, and is three inches long. Each gavel head is mushroomed, suggesting repeated use. Additionally, both heads are soldered onto their hafts, with thin lines of solder visible around the joint. To the right of the level is a column on a square base, attached to the rectangular base,

and to the left is a plumb, attached at its top to the left arm of the square (for a comparable tool, see fig. 4). A faint line on the plumb suggests the string from which the bob would hang.



Fig. 1. Door Knocker, one of a pair, ca. 1890-1915. Brass, H. 5 1/2" W. 4 1/2" (Winterthur Accession No. 1964.0016.001).

Before these knockers entered the collection, they were almost certainly purchased and used by a Masonic lodge. The two pieces were likely produced by the Henderson-Ames company of Kalamazoo, Michigan, or by a similar company specializing in fraternal regalia, between 1890 and 1925.² The Henderson-Ames company formed out of a merger between the Ames Sword Company, then of Chicago, and the Frank Henderson company, of Kalamazoo, and was one of several companies capitalizing on the increasing number and membership of fraternal organizations in the United States.³

The knockers are composed of several Masonic symbols arranged together. The symbols and teaching are largely derived from the stonemason's craft and expressed through the tools and methods of the trade. Modern freemasons were considered *speculative* masons, as opposed to the *operative* masons (i.e. literal stonemasons) from whom they supposedly descended. The square and compass are recognizable Masonic motifs representing moral uprightness.⁴ The compass, in particular, is thought to circumscribe the conduct of a good Mason: the center point is the mason, and the inscribed circle "the boundary line of his conduct to God and Man."⁵ The hammer or gavel that acts as the knocker represents the act of expelling vice from the soul, as the gavel chips off the rough edges of an ashlar block being dressed, or hits a chisel to further refine the stone.⁶ All tools of the trade, these symbols draw a clear link between the skilled workmanship practiced by operative masons and the moral character pursued by speculative Masons. If tools are instrumental for the operative mason's work, they become implicitly symbolic of the ritual and ideological "tools" used by speculative Masons to shape the character.

The three columns supporting the level symbolize the pillars of the lodge: wisdom, strength, and beauty. These virtues are associated with the three orders of columns, and likewise with biblical figures Solomon (wisdom, Ionic), Hiram, King of Tyre (strength, Doric) and mythical architect Hiram Abiff (beauty, Corinthian).⁷ The broken column suggests mourning, though it seems to be a more obscure symbol.⁸ The three rows of tiles on the base, as well as the three steps in the center, symbolize both the tiers of advancement in the Masonic order, and the stages of human life.⁹ All of these symbols would have been intelligible to the initiated, but inscrutable to most lay people.

By the late nineteenth century, the tools of the masonic trade as depicted in Masonic symbolism would have been only part of the toolbox of operative masonry. Hammers, chisels, and plumb bobs were joined by pneumatic tools and spirit levels.¹⁰ In omitting newer technologies of operative masonry, the symbolic Mason's tools were an archaizing force, in some small measure removing the order from the industrial era into an ambiguous past where traditional craftsmanship and its attendant moral values flourished. Ironically, "working tools" decorated to the point of complete impracticality (fig. 4) were produced on an industrial scale for lodges by Henderson-Ames and similar companies.¹¹ While their use is not specified in the catalogue, they likely helped to establish a further material link between speculative Masons and the operative masons of a bygone era.

CONCEPTIONS OF MASONIC SPACE

Masonic practice and lodge architecture helps place where in a Masonic structure these knockers would

have been located, a crucial factor in interpreting their meaning. The organization of Masonic interiors, and the very existence of dedicated Masonic structures, reflected the teachings and sensibilities of Masons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Up until the middle third of the nineteenth century, Masonic meetings were often held in ballrooms, taverns, or any other space that could accommodate a group of people in relative seclusion.¹² By the end of the century, a purpose-built structure was de rigueur for any lodge organization, regardless of size. These ranged in size and grandiosity from small meeting halls to the palatial second empire hall that now serves as Wilmington's Grand Opera House.

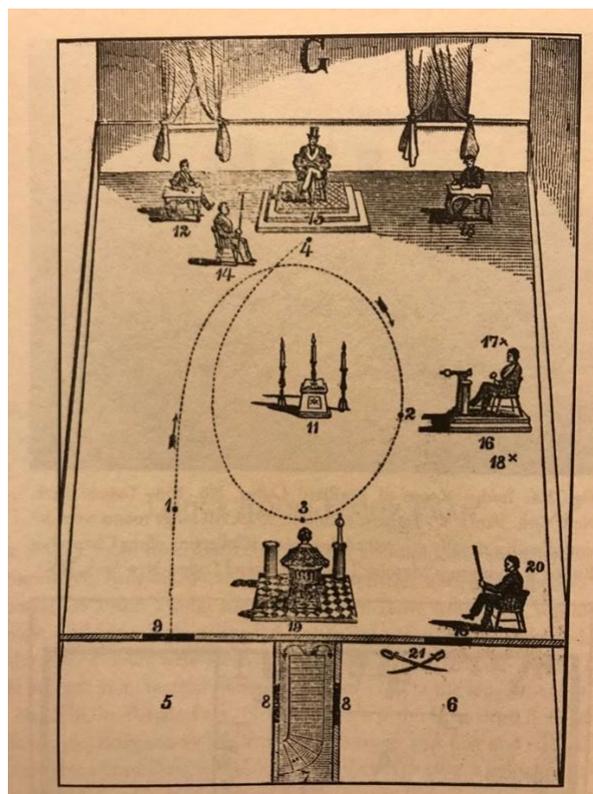


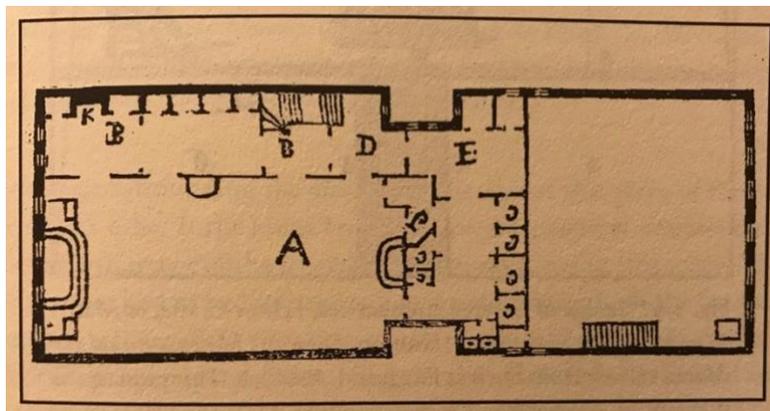
Fig. 2. Internal layout of Lodge Room, from Malcolm C. Duncan, *Duncan's Ritual and Masonic Monitor*, 1866. (Moore, 22)

The core of the Masonic hall was the lodge room, the symbolically arranged space where meetings and initiations were conducted. In the Masonic imagination, the order traced their lineage back to the builders of King Solomon's temple on Mount Moriah.¹³ The lodge room reflected this perceived lineage inasmuch as it was a stand-in for the Temple itself and was spatially organized in a way intended to recall the Temple's inner tabernacle. This rectangular room was occasionally called the "Oblong Square" and was spatially oriented with the long axis usually running east to west. Figure 2 shows the oblong square with daises on three sides for officers, and the altar

in the center. Figure 3 shows a plan of a lodge's upper story, with the lodge room marked "A". Typically, one short end of the room would contain two small doors leading to the rest of the hall.¹⁴ The knockers were probably placed on the exterior of these doors (in the rooms marked 5 and 6 in Figure 2, and at point J and the entrance below point J in Figure 3) dividing the lodge room from its antechambers.

Since the knockers were not, in all likelihood, affixed to the front door of the Masonic hall, they would not have been visible to passersby on the street. Viewing them already required entrance into the Masonic space of the lodge building, implying a level of familiarity. The knockers were part of the interior partition that separated the hall generally from the lodge room which, by the second half of the nineteenth century, was conceptualized as a sacred space.¹⁵ Several *Monitors* or Masonic ritual guidebooks of the period specifically use the term "consecration" in reference to the dedication of new Masonic lodge rooms,¹⁶ and one commentator referred to the lodge chamber as "a soul within a tabernacle of clay."¹⁷ This is a particularly interesting comparison. If the Masonic structure is equated with the tabernacle, the "soul" or lodge room is conflated with the *sanctum sanctorum* as described in the Bible.¹⁸ As part of lodge's fabric, the knockers face toward the outside world without confronting it directly. They are attendant to the lodge room's entrance, and entry into the room is occasionally contingent upon using the knockers. In this sense they stand alongside the doors, doorknobs, locks, and keys as artifacts that control movement between spaces, and most crucially the movement between outside and inside. In a Masonic lodge, the exclusivity of members-only spaces, and the implied moral superiority granted by membership, make the distinction between inside and outside particularly meaningful.

In privileged (or exclusionary) spaces, boundaries are of paramount importance. In the spiritually invested environment of the lodge room, physical boundaries reflected, and reinforced, the ideological distance between Masons and non-masons. These physical barriers could be either impermeable (walls, ceilings, floors) or permeable (windows, doors). As routes of ingress for both initiates and outsiders, these permeable boundaries were sources of particular anxiety. Masonic building design mitigated this anxiety as much as it could: lodge rooms were built on second and third floors when possible, windows were kept to a minimum or omitted entirely, and spaces were soundproofed.¹⁹ Doors remained necessary, and became subject to specific rituals in which door knockers could play a crucial part. They necessitated the office of *Tyler* (or



Tyler)—a guard, traditionally armed with a sword, posted

Fig. 3. Third-Floor Plan of Masonic Temple, Troy, New York. Cummings and Birt, architects, 1872. (Moore, p. 21).

outside the lodge room door during meetings (see number 21, with crossed swords, in Figure 2 for the location of the Tyler). It was he who controlled the movement of latecomers or candidates into the ritual space. In this case, it is likely that the Tyler and candidates were the most frequent users of these and similar door knockers.

KNOCKING AND MASONIC RITUAL

Aside from the abstract concept of entrance, knockers obviously facilitate the act of knocking, which in Masonic practice is imbued with symbolism, particularly in the rituals of initiation or advancement in degrees. In the initiation ritual, the candidate knocks thrice at the door to the inner lodge, which is then opened. In the catechistic line of questioning that forms part of the initiation, the candidate is asked the significance of the three knocks. He responds that they have threefold purpose, to "alarm the lodge, and inform the Worshipful Master that I was prepared for Masonry, and in accordance to our ancient custom, that I should ask."²⁰ The last clause refers to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you," which the candidate is paraphrasing.²¹ The act of knocking is associated with the initiate's request to join the lodge of his own free will, and is also an auditory signifier of willingness and obeisance. "Do you seriously declare... [that] you freely and voluntarily offer yourself a candidate for the mysteries of Freemasonry?" one Masonic manual asks initiates.²² The character-building benefits of Masonry are only available to those initiates who explicitly seek them out, and who commit themselves to the guidance of Masonic teachings. Knocking in various sequences is used similarly in the transitions from Apprentice, to Fellow Craft, and then to Master Mason, with different numbers of knocks holding symbolic significance in each elevation. Masons drew further cognitive ties between the physical entrance of the lodge

room and the process of initiation, with one writer remarking that candidates “stand on the threshold of this new Masonic life, in darkness, helplessness, and ignorance.”²³ The initiate is presented as being blind (and is equipped with a blindfold or hoodwink, see Figure 4) until the moment of initiation when they are shown the literal and proverbial light. In framing the initiate as lowly, humble, and without status in Masonry, the initiation has much in common with worldwide initiation rituals.²⁴ Upon entering the brotherhood, the initiate is greeted with a kind of classlessness, one in which “all men stand upon an exact equality, and receive its instructions in a spirit of due humility.”²⁵ These words suggest a Masonic form of *communitas* in which exterior hierarchical distinctions are obliterated and the members are subject only to the principals of Freemasonry.²⁶ The delineation between Masonic and non-Masonic space was a crucial to preserving the sense of Masonic brotherhood, and the door knockers were an important part of maintaining this distinction.

The knockers are part of the threshold between rarified, privileged Masonic space and the exterior world, forming part of the intellectual landscape of the lodge structure by helping to cement the opposition between the two. They also mediate between the two spaces as part of the Masonic soundscape. In Duncan’s texts, knocks are occasionally referred to as alarms (which these knockers are also called in Henderson-Ames’ catalog). Removed from their likely original location on a door, the knockers make, at most, a high, flat and not particularly loud rapping noise that belies their original volume. In situ, a wooden door, picking up the vibrations generated by the knocker, would resonate like the soundboard in a string instrument, producing a much richer and louder noise. It is also worth noting that soundproofed rooms work both ways, in that what keeps interior noises from reaching outside would also keep outside noises out. The knocker on the door is an exception to this and, when sounded, would probably be one of the few sonic intrusions into sacred Masonic space.

Because the knockers help establish the boundary between sacred and profane, they also act as a temporal boundary. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Masons enacted a ritualistic sense of timelessness



Fig. 4. “Working Tools” (from *Illustrated and Descriptive Price List: Regalia, Paraphernalia, Costumes and Supplies for A.F. & A. Masons of All Jurisdictions*, 1905. 21).

in their lodge rooms, unmoored from contemporary society, and secured to an anachronistic lineage that stretched back to the days of Solomon. Increasingly, suppliers manufactured theatrical costumes and revival furniture for lodges, turning interiors into a patchwork of different cultures and eras.²⁷ Masons even marshalled etiquette to the cause, prohibiting discussions of current politics and religion inside the lodge.²⁸ This effort was intended to foster a sense of unity and brotherhood central to Masonic thought, but it also contributed to the sense of the lodge as a space out of time; in the lodge, Masons were a homogenous and exclusive group unfettered by hierarchies and structures of the outside world.²⁹

REGALIA ON THE MARKET

The Masons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century employed a constellation of objects to enhance and supplement their rituals. Regalia companies, of which Henderson-Ames was only one example, mass produced products to fill the expanding appetite for fraternal ritualistic objects. The Henderson-Ames catalog alone included furniture (kneelers, altars, officers’ chairs, etc.), costumes, texts, and sundry decorative objects such as the knockers. Some of these, such as officer-specific chairs, contributed to the overall sense of the lodge as a theatrical and mystical space separate from the outside world.³⁰ Others, such as transparencies, magic lanterns, hoodwinks, and spotlights, contributed more directly to specific ritual performances (fig. 5).³¹ Hoodwinks, for example, replaced the traditional blindfold in the initiation ritual. The candidate would wear the hoodwink and be kept in the dark until the moment of initiation, at which point the hoodwink would be opened. The candidate’s entrance

into Freemasonry would literally and metaphorically allow him to see clearly. Lapel pins and other personal adornments extended beyond the lodge, signifying the wearer as a Mason to the outside world and possibly serving as a personal reminder of Masonic oaths and obligations.

If the knockers' use, and that of other mass-produced Masonic goods was critical to understanding their meaning in Masonic lodges, so was the context of their manufacture. Consumer and manufacturers such as the Henderson-Ames company and their fraternal clientele engaged in a reciprocal relationship in which both were responsible for imbuing the manufactured object with meanings. Some investigation into Henderson-Ames and similar regalia companies is necessary to properly situate the door knockers in the American marketplace. If, as we have seen, material goods such as door knockers became crucial parts of a ritualized space, what does it mean for these material goods to be mass produced?

It is significant that a documentary record of these knockers can be found in a mail-order catalogue. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the mail-order catalogue was an increasingly popular method of marketing and selling products. Catalogues were sent all over the country, in some cases (such as that of Henderson-Ames) eliminating the need for a brick-and-mortar storefronts. It is likely that the expansive national markets opened up by the advent of mail-order business contributed to manufacturing firms as specialized as regalia-makers. A single city or state market might not support a specialized regalia-maker, but the national economy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century supported several. Rather than being distributed on an individual or household basis, Henderson-Ames catalogues were distributed to lodges, and were evidently

meant to be kept on hand for ordering as the need arose.³² The catalogue example at Winterthur has small sections cut out, further suggesting a pattern of repeated use.

Companies such as Henderson-Ames manufactured and marketed their own goods. The Redding & Co. catalogue of Masonic regalia of 1895 endeavored to convince customers that:

When an organization claims to be, and is, the grandest and most ancient Order under the Sun, is watched not only by friends, but by the skeptical and prejudiced, and when its members parade in public, they are judged principally by their appearance... when such a procession is seen wearing cheap and shabby regalia, it is likely to challenge adverse criticism... on the Order to which it belongs.³³

Redding & Co. sidestepped symbolic and ritual concerns for more pragmatic ones, namely pride and reputation. They also noted the sensual pleasures of a well-outfitted lodge-room, stating that "...a shabby appearance always mars the enjoyment of the members, especially if they have for visitors, members of more *ambitious* lodges [emphasis added]."³⁴ There is an insinuation of competition in the suggestion that lodges had a duty to keep up, at least to a degree, with the visual standards of their fellow lodges.

Stripped from their original location, this pair of door knockers loses much of its significance. The symbolism of the various masonic motifs of which they are composed is simple enough to tease out, but the true meaning of the pieces is highly dependent on spatial and ritual context. When placed back in a conjectural, but likely, original location, the knockers regain several more layers of meaning. As tools of the Tyler, they facilitated movement into the sacrosanct ritual space of the lodge room. As elements of the internal partition between hall and lodge, they helped define the lodge room as a space above and distinct from the outside world, a kind of alternate reality within which Masonic business should be conducted. The Tyler also figuratively allowed the world to penetrate sonically into the ritual space so long as the person entering knocked for admission. In Henderson-Ames's catalog, they appeared as simple, inexpensive decorative objects. Put into the context of a lodge, they became important tools for the enactment of Masonic ritual and, by extension, the expression of Masonic thought.

By the time they were mounted on the wall of the lodge, the door knockers were many commodities rolled into one

package. They were the material value of the brass and the labor value of casting and finishing it. They shaped the visual aesthetics of the lodge space. They commodified the

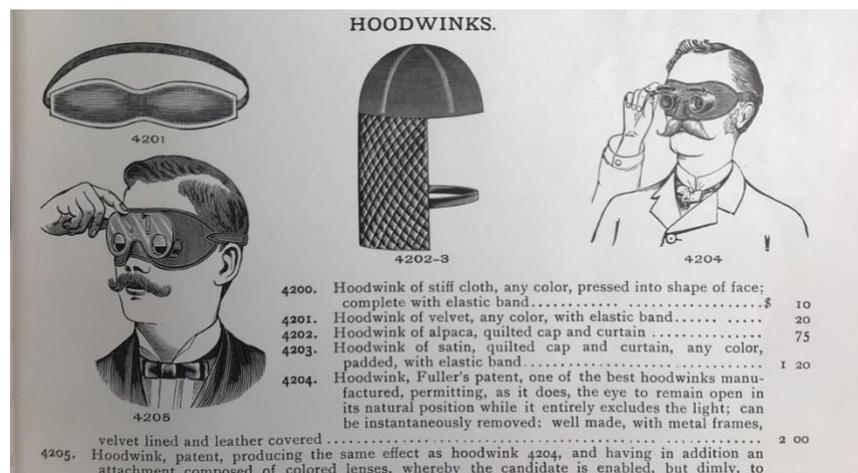


Fig. 5. Hoodwinks (from *Descriptive Price List*, 21).

ritualistic, symbolic, and ideological meanings discussed above, packaged conveniently as a commercial product. In that sense, Henderson-Ames's business was to sell ritual, symbol, and meaning in the form of clothing, swords, jewelry, and hardware.

Similarly, documentary and empirical evidence suggest that many of America's religious institutions, Protestant and Catholic alike, incorporated increasingly elaborate modes of ritual and design in the late nineteenth century. While the development and marketing of Catholic clerical vestments and fraternal regalia in the nineteenth century shared many features, it is easy to overstate their similarities based on common forms of manufacturing and

distribution. But the comparison, while superficial, does suggest that several organizations within American society underwent similar and roughly simultaneous shifts toward material and theatrical rituals. What accounts for this? Perhaps the shifts were coincidental, and manufacturers only responded to a perceived demand. Likely the causal factors were somewhere between the two, with manufacturers and consumers egging each other on towards a proliferation of mass-market goods.³⁵ While the Masonic door knockers in the Winterthur Museum collections are now isolated from their original contexts, they nevertheless point outward towards important changes in the material landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

¹ To avoid confusion, I use "Mason" to denote Freemasons and Freemasonry, and "mason" to refer to the profession.

² *Illustrated and Descriptive Price List: Regalia, Paraphernalia, Costumes and Supplies for A.F. & A. Masons of All Jurisdictions* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Henderson-Ames Company, 1905), 37.

³ William D. Moore, *Masonic Temples: Freemasonry, Ritual Architecture, and Masculine Archetypes* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), xv. and William D. Moore, "Masonic Lodge Rooms and Their Furnishings," in *Heredom: Transactions of the Scottish Rite Research Society*, Vol. 2 (1993): 99.

⁴ *Masonic Symbols in American Decorative Arts* (Lexington, Mass.: Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library, 1976), 68.

⁵ Moses Wolcott Redding, *The Practical Monitor* (New York: Redding and Co., 1876), 23.

⁶ *Masonic Symbols*, 50.

⁷ Moore, *Temples*, 3.

⁸ *Masonic Symbols*, 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 52; John D. Hamilton, *Material Culture of the American Freemasons* (Lexington, Mass.: Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library, 1995), 68.

¹⁰ For a general overview of pneumatic stonemason's tools available at the beginning of the twentieth century, see *Catalogue No. 37: Stone Tools* (Chicago: Chicago Pneumatic Tool Company, 1912).

¹¹ *Descriptive Price List*, 21.

¹² Hamilton, *Material Culture of the American Freemasons*, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.* 15

¹⁴ Moore, *Temples*, 20.

¹⁵ Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 38. See also Moore, *Temples*, 32.

¹⁶ *Michigan Masonic Monitor*, (Alma, Mich.: Grand Lodge of Michigan, 1897), 34; Also Shaver, William M. *Shaver's*

Masonic Monitor (Topeka, Kan.: Wm. M. Shaver and A.K. Wilson, 1907), 232.

¹⁷ Moore, *Temples*, 16.

¹⁸ 1 Kings 6:19

¹⁹ Moore, *Temples*, 26.

²⁰ Malcolm C. Duncan, *Duncan's Masonic Ritual and Monitor* (New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1866), 49.

²¹ Matthew 7:7, KJV.

²² George Thornburgh, *Masonic Monitor of the Degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason* (Little Rock, Ark.: George Thornburgh, 1909), 18.

²³ Dumenil, 39.

²⁴ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 95.

²⁵ Thornburgh, 17.

²⁶ Turner, 96-97.

²⁷ For example, see: *Catalogue of Masonic Works and Outfits* (New York: Redding and Co., 1895), 15; Moore, *Furnishings*, 100.

²⁸ George Oliver, *The Book of the Lodge; or, Officer's Manual* (London: R. Spencer, 1864), 31.

²⁹ Turner, 96-97.

³⁰ Moore, *Furnishings*: 117-122.

³¹ For the Masonic turn towards theatrics, see Brockman, C. Lance et al. "The Lure of the Spectacular" in *Theater of the Fraternity: Staging the Ritual Space of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 19-29.

³² *Descriptive Price List*, front cover.

³³ *Catalogue of Masonic Works and Outfits*. (New York: Redding and Co., 1895), 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 2.

³⁵ For Catholic vestments and material devotion, see Katherine Hurwich Haas, *The Fabric of Religion: Vestments and Devotional Catholicism in Nineteenth-Century America.* Unpub. M.A. thesis, Winterthur Program in American Material Culture, University of Delaware, 2004; For the theatricalization of evangelical worship, see: Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became*

*Theater: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and
Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2002); for example, *Catalogue of Church
Ornaments* (New York: Benzinger Brothers. 1889-90).