

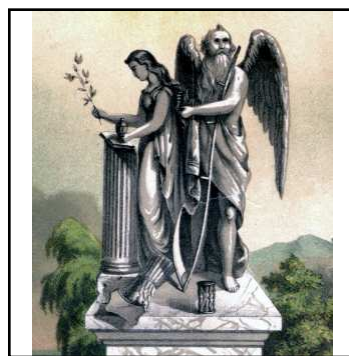
The Weeping Virgin
A Masonic Tracing Board & Treatise
by
Christopher L. Murphy, BF



Acrylic on panel, 48 inches by 48 inches (a perfect square) by Christopher L. Murphy.
(Photo: Bro. Barry Blount)

The Masonic “Weeping Virgin” (monument to Hiram Abiff) symbolism has intrigued me since I became a Freemason in 1973. Of late, I decided to do my own painting of the subject, and incorporate other Masonic symbolism, thus creating a Masonic tracing board which effectively sums up some of the most important Masonic teachings.

Some of the various depictions of the “Weeping Virgin” (drawings or paintings) down through the ages are interesting and are shown here:



These images are not in date order. I am a little surprised at one image (sixth) which shows the winged man (Time) not looking at the lady’s (virgin’s) hair. The last illustration, which appears somewhat contemporary, is what I used as the model/inspiration for my “tracing board”—with due respect. I have not been able to find the name of the artist for this work.



The first person to suggest a monument to Hiram Abiff and provide a design (as shown here) was Thomas Johnson in 1782. Johnson included several symbols, including the sun, moon, and the square and compasses. The inscription reads:

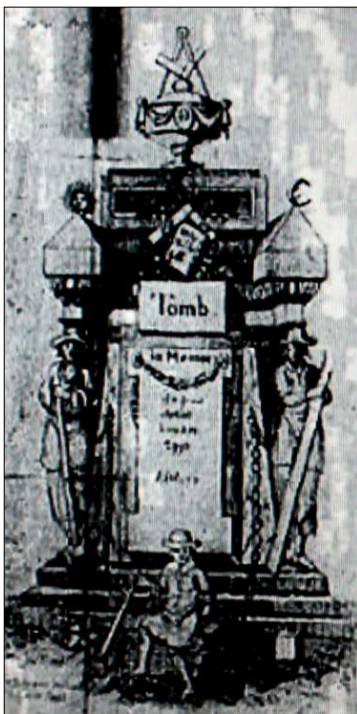
In Memory of a Great Artist
Born A.M. 2995, Etat 47.

I believe the word “Etat” is from the phrase, “Coup d’etat” which means to overthrow, strike against, or strike down. I will guess that the number 47 means “in his 47th year.”

It does not appear Johnson’s design received very much attention; however, the idea of a monument “took root.” In 1817, John Barney introduced a monument design with a weeping virgin, Time, and a column—but not a broken column. Two years later (1819), Jeremy Cross introduced a broken column (first image previously shown). However, Cross’s rather shattered column apparently gave way in subsequent artwork to just a single broken piece, thus we arrived at the basic image we now have.

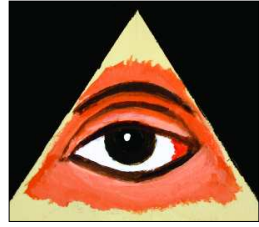
As I have mentioned, I used the last image shown for my design. However, I made Time less handsome, and dressed the virgin in a white over-garment rather than one that is off-white with a pattern (which appears very odd to me).

I am sure most Freemasons will immediately recognize and associate with the various symbols in my tracing board, including that of the “Weeping Virgin” theme; nevertheless, all are explained as follows. Please keep in mind that the interpretation of Masonic symbols can vary and may include personal judgement.



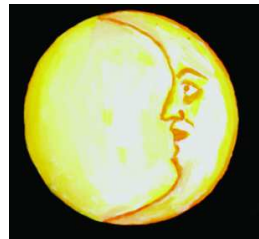
Monument to Hiram Abiff by Thomas Johnson, 1782.

All-Seeing Eye: This essentially symbolizes that nothing in life goes “unseen” and Freemasons must therefore guard their words and actions at all times. For certain, this is far more applicable now than even 20 years ago. With the internet, a photograph or words can be made available to over a billion people within a few seconds.

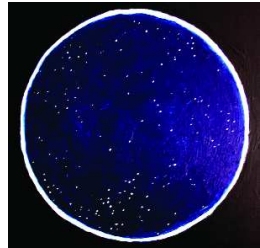


Pyramid: Freemasons symbolically construct a “temporal building” throughout their life. As a pyramid is the perfect “building,” I elected to show one in the background. A pyramid cannot essentially be tipped over, and can withstand the forces of nature. For these reasons, the Egyptians and many other ancient cultures built pyramids. I wish to stress that the pyramid belongs to the world. By its use, I am not implying any connection to ancient cultures.

Sun and Moon: These symbolize the need to be regular and trustworthy. We can always count on the sun to bring us a “day,” and the moon will always be there according to its schedule. One might question why Freemasons put a face on each of these heavenly bodies. From my own perspective, this is simply to provide “character.” It has nothing to do with sun or moon worship nor has it any occult inferences. As children, we might recall always putting faces on both the sun and moon in our drawings—it is simply just a natural tendency, especially when such are used as symbols.



Terrestrial and Celestial Spheres: These are symbols of “wonder.” The wonders of the earth and the universe are so vast they can never be “exhausted.” As such, they are a “gift” which Freemasons are encouraged to explore, in every sense of that word (“geometry, navigation, astronomy and the arts dependent on them”). There can be no reason for a person to lose interest in life when we have so much to interest us. The terrestrial globe also denotes the universality of Freemasonry. It might be noted that the stars and planets in the Celestial Sphere are correctly placed.



Beehive: This is a symbol of industry. It urges the Freemason to keep busy and always seek new frontiers. It also encourages activity—not to be lazy and complacent. Furthermore, it connotes “sharing” and “cooperation.”



Square and Compasses with the letter “G”: This symbol is fully familiar to all Freemasons. The square is a symbol of morality, and the compasses of “due bounds.” One envisions a circle and keeps his desires and passions within permitted bounds. The letter “G” symbolizes a “Supreme Being.” It can stand for Geometrician (of the Universe), or God. However, I need to mention that use of the “G” is not applicable in all countries.



We now come to the central part of the painting which is comprised of many symbols forming a “theme.” The direct reference of

the theme is the death of Hiram Abiff (with whom all Freemasons are directly connected through the ritual of the Third Degree) and incompleteness of the temple that Hiram Abiff was in charge of constructing. In effect two (2) temples remain incomplete: the physical temple, and the “temporal” building or temple of Hiram Abiff himself. In this latter sense, the virgin is weeping over the death of every Freemason who has passed on to the Grand Lodge Above, and will allegorically weep for you and me when the time comes. Keep in mind that *every* Master Mason is, in a symbolic sense, the embodiment of Hiram Abiff.

Broken Column: Symbolizes the death of a person. It carries the message that a person has been “cut down” by death. A column is a beautiful architectural feature, and to see one broken evokes sadness. A broken column is often used on graves in cemeteries. Furthermore, in the full context of the Third Degree legend, it represents incompleteness of the physical temple (construction has been “cut off,” as it were).



Book on the Column: Symbolizes the book of one’s life. In other words, an account of all of one’s deeds and virtues—in a narrow sense, those of Hiram Abiff; in a broad sense those of every deceased Freemason.



Young Lady (Weeping Virgin): A symbol of sorrow. She is reading from the book of one’s life. She holds an urn in her left hand that contains ashes of the person who has died. In her right hand she holds a sprig of acacia, which is a symbol of life, or the life hereafter. Keep in mind the significance of the acacia plant in the ritual of the Third



Degree. The urn is a little controversial in the context of the ritual as bodies were not cremated in the religion of Hiram Abiff. This being the case, the urn is said to contain the tears of those who mourned. I will mention here that “memorial paintings,” whereby a small amount of ash is mixed with the paint, were (and still are) commissioned. Mixing ash of a departed brother in the paint used for the urn in this type of painting would be ideal in a Masonic sense.

Winged Man: This figure is a symbol of “Time.” An hourglass is seen next to his left foot. He has a scythe which is a symbol of death. In this case, Time is death as time eventually catches up with everyone. His left breast



(position of one’s heart) is bare which has ritual significance. He is holding the young lady’s long hair which is in ringlets. What he is doing is untangling the ringlets, which is a symbol of patience and perseverance. The lesson is that with these qualities one will accomplish all things. (Actual text says that Time is “unfolding” the ringlets, but I am not sure if this is possible, unless it means separating one series of ringlets from another series.)

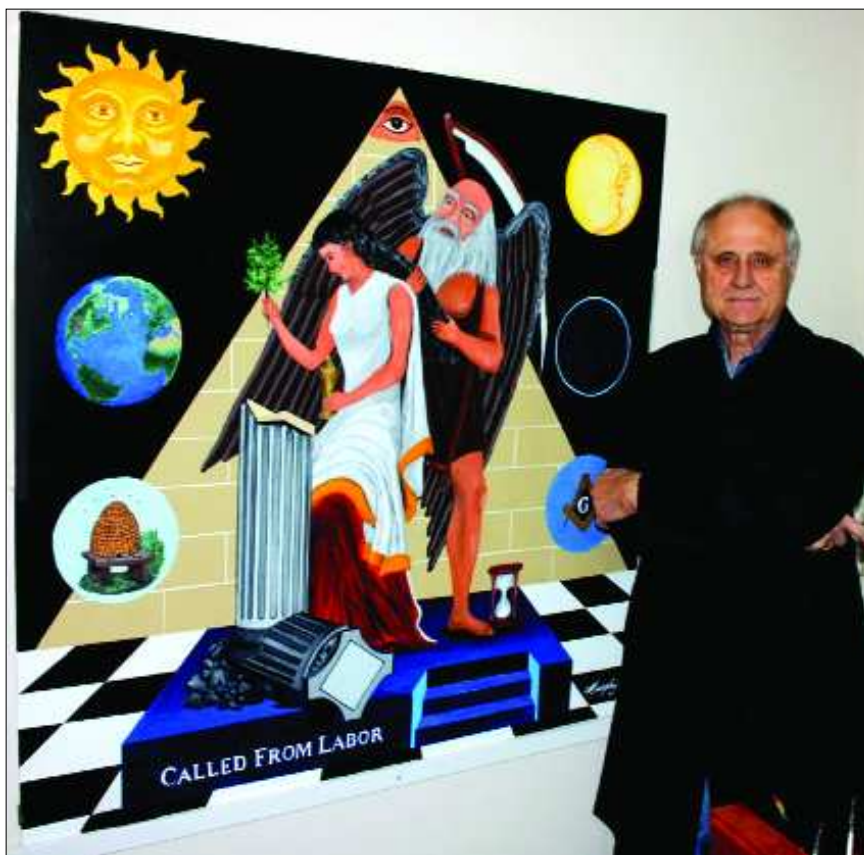
Platform: I have put the figures on a raised platform with three steps representing Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. The steps can also be symbolizing youth, middle age, and advanced age.



Checkered Floor (Mosaic Pavement): This symbolizes life which is checkered with good and evil.

Term: “Called from Labor”: In Masonic terms, life is labor, and when one is “called from labor” he has gone to the Grand Lodge Above.

Our early Brethren gave a lot of thought to the symbolism of the “Weeping Virgin.” Indeed, everything in Freemasonry is exceedingly well thought out. Although one needs to sort of “get into it,” many of the “veiled” messages are really quite astounding.



Brother Murphy with his acrylic painting. He started oil painting in earnest in the early 1970s, but after about 8 years drifted into other interests. In 2010, now age 69, he again took up the hobby. Although acrylic paint was reasonably available in the 1970s, it was not preferred by many artists. At this time it is widely available, and superior to that of the early years. It is also safer to use, and more environmentally friendly.

Although not active at the present time, Chris Murphy is a Past Master, RAM, MMM, 32 Degree AASR Mason, Shriner, and a Blue Friar (Masonic Authors). Your comments on this paper are most welcome. Please email <cmurphy101@shaw.ca>.

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