

Visual Aids In Masonic Education

Unknown

This Short Talk Bulletin has been adapted from a paper presented at the Northeast Conference on Masonic Education and Libraries in 1963 by the late Most Worshipful Brother Conrad Hahn, PGM, Connecticut and former Executive Secretary of The Masonic Service Association.

In considering this subject, we must not be misled into thinking that we have suddenly gone modern. Visual aids in education are not only one of the oldest specialties in modern pedagogical practices; they are also among the oldest teaching devices used by man. Even Pythagoras used visual aids in demonstrating the 47th Problem; he probably traced the figure on the sand so that his students could visualize it. Freemasonry, likewise, has been using visual aids ever since it became an instructive art, whether operative or speculative.

During the eighteenth century the lodge of each degree was traced upon the floor of the room in which the brethren met. With such designs it was possible to illustrate many of the symbolic actions of the ritual by actually walking the candidate through the various areas of the Craftmen's lodge.

By the time the nineteenth century had arrived, these charcoal, chalk, and clay designs on the floor (rather messy to remove) had given way to tracing boards or wall charts, on which the Master or instructor pointed to the various symbols or objects which were delineated thereon for the visual instruction of the candidate. In America the most famous of these was Jeremy Cross', The True Masonic Chart and Hieroglyphical Monitor. Such charts enjoyed a vogue in the 1800's which is hard to describe to modern lodge members, because they are not accustomed to complete exemplifications of the symbolic degrees, including all sections of the lectures.

From the very beginning of symbolic initiations in fraternal organizations, ritualistic floor work was conceived and intended to be a visual as well as an auditory or dramatic aid to the instruction of candidates. What the candidate sees is one of the most important devices for impressing on his mind the spirit and tenets of the institution. This is why neat and proper dress, smooth and intelligible rendition of speeches, clean aprons, well maintained costumes, precise and well rehearsed movements – all are important visual aids to impress upon the initiate the dignity, decorum, philosophy and traditions of Freemasonry. Any discussion of visual aids for

Masonic education, therefore, should begin with an insistence on thorough, competent, ritualistic floor work. Good ritual exemplification is a "must" in Masonic instruction, for seeing is believing.

Most of us, however, in talking about visual aids in education, have in mind such modern mechanical devices as films, motion picture projectors, film strips, tachistoscopes, graphs, speed reading machines, etc. Grand Lodge committees on Masonic culture or education would be well advised to go slowly in considering plans for promoting the use of many such devices in the constituent lodges as a result of the advice of well-meaning brethren who are "experts" in the field of visual education. There are definite limitations on the use of modern visual aids in Masonic lodges.

The chief function of a Grand Lodge Committee on Masonic Culture or Education, so far as visual aids are concerned, should be the collecting and collating of information about visual aids. What Masonic or other suitable films, slides, film strips, projectors, stereopticons, charts, etc. are there available within the Jurisdiction. Where? Which are available on loan, or for purchase, or rental? What are the best ones for lodge halls or larger auditoriums? All these questions can be answered by experts in the field of visual education, or by representatives of corporations which manufacture visual aids equipment, and which have spent much time and money in researching this area.

For many years Masonic lodges have limited their use of visual aids to slides projected through a stereopticon, to illustrate the symbols explained in the lectures of the degrees. As a matter of fact, such slides (or film strips) are practically the only visual aids equipment advertised in the catalogs of Masonic Supply companies. Of course, some Grand Jurisdictions do not permit their use.

I trust I shall not be completely misunderstood when I say, "Brethren, it's time for a change!" The available slides and film strips are as dated as antimacassars and Morris Chairs; they are artistically crude and uninspiring. Some are horrible examples of over-crowded design or composition. Some are illogical in the point of view presented throughout a series, jumping from the ancient to the Victorian, and back to a medieval conception. They don't impress well-educated initiates; they bore them or cause them to laugh.

I have never forgotten my first impressions of the four cardinal virtues explained in the E.A. degree. There were flashed on the screen four stiff, amply bosomed goddesses of doubtful Greek origin, so vacant in their expressions, and so voluminously draped in a mid-Victorian fashion, that when Prudence appeared, I instinctively shuddered and said to myself, "Her name may be Prudence, but the only thing her father and mother taught her was prudery."

I'm not asking for an Epstein nude or a spidery Modern Calder mobile; but certainly we have enough gifted Brothers in the arts of design and painting, who could produce symbolic

suggestions of the four cardinal virtues more appropriate to the age of Space, not to have to put up with that dull and listless stuff any longer.

In fact, with the enthusiasm for photography prevalent today, and with the excellent equipment being used by shutter-bugs in every community, lodges could be encouraged to initiate some "do it yourself" projects for visual aids of this kind. Glass slides can still be made fairly cheaply on the handicraft basis. Some Brothers with skills in sketching and design could be put to work to make such illuminated aids for ritualistic instruction in the lectures of the three degrees. The more we can give new members some challenging and interesting projects to complete, the more we shall capture and hold their interest in Masonry .

The commonest area of interest in visual aids, especially in Masonic lodges today, is motion pictures, not primarily for instructional purposes, but for purposes of entertainment and inspiration. Here again, Grand Lodge Committees should consider their function to be simply that of a clearing-house or information center. Some value judgments will have to be made concerning the kinds of films to list, because willy-nilly, such catalogs of films will become "official," in the sense that "the Grand Lodge approves these films for lodge use." Film library experts should be consulted and used in this kind of work.

The most logical place to start is with the Film Library at the state university. Practically all of them maintain prints of motion pictures for educational and inspirational use which are available to schools, civic agencies, clubs, and industrial training programs. The rental fees are usually quite modest. Every Grand Lodge Committee on Masonic Information could work up such a list of recommended films for lodge programs, by consulting the film librarians at their state universities.

Businesses and industrial corporations sometimes make available an outstanding play or special program which they sponsored as a television program. These films, if available, are usually listed in the film catalogs or agencies like the ones mentioned above.

In addition, corporations are also producing films for their own public relations programs; and while many of these are fundamentally "sales talks" to push their own products, some of them rise above that level and become valuable programs for general education .

Really, the greatest problem in developing a catalog of films for lodge use is NOT where to turn or what to look for; it's the fact that you can never stop. Such lists will have to be revised and added to year after year.

Let me also remind you that your Masonic Service Association has produced some films for lodge use, – primarily to furnish good speakers via the movie camera for lodges which cannot bring outstanding speakers into their lodges. M.S.A. maintains a library of Masonic films which are available for a small rental service fee.

While I do not believe that Committees on Masonic Education should encourage the use of motion pictures as the principal programming device for their constituent lodges, especially for "educational" or "inspirational nights," I am sure that we all agree that these visual aids have a definite place in the over-all improvement of lodge activities, especially in helping Masters bring light to the Craft. But Masters need help. They need information. and that is why I suggest that such committees limit their function to provide film catalogs and lists to benefit the lodges of their Jurisdiction .

There is indeed a God's plenty in this particular area of visual aids. Consult the experts. If some of them are Brothers, put them to work. They'll like their Masonry better if they can serve it usefully.

Motion pictures are here to stay. They can serve the great purposes for which we are laboring here. So let there be light-about visual aids as well as about mentor systems and lodges of instruction.

Editors Note: Films available from The Masonic Service Association are listed and summarized in the Masonic Digests and Films catalog which will be furnished upon request.

STB – June 1979