

Looking into the Eye of Providence

Among those not initiated to the craft there are many well-known “facts” about the genesis of the United States and Freemasonry’s part in it. Tall tales, such as the great seal being a masonic symbol; the streets of Washington DC containing secret masonic symbols, or a masonic takeover of the worlds governments. For many, these are filed among such historical myths as George Washington chopping down the cherry tree and Ben Franklin suggesting the turkey as our national bird.

Depending on whom you hear it from; Freemasons are planning the takeover themselves, or are working in concert with European bankers, or working in concert with the Illuminati. The notion of a worldwide Masonic conspiracy would be laughable, if it were not being repeated with such earnest gullibility by conspiracists from John Robson in, the 1790s all the way up through Pat Robertson in the present; this of course has been fodder for popular fiction for decades.

However, for now, we will focus the eye in the pyramid, as seen on the back of the great seal of the United States; and by extension the Eye of Providence itself.

The eye is one of many similar symbols across many cultures and histories around the world. Wherever humanity has seen fit to pay tribute to a deity, there has often been a similar symbol to represent the watchful eye of such a higher power, regardless of name.

Perhaps the most well-known of these is the Egyptian Eye of Horus. According to legend, when Set and Horus were fighting for the throne after Osiris's death, Set gouged out Horus's left eye. Hathor restored the eye, and upon recovery; Horus offered it to his father, Osiris, in hopes of restoring his life. Hence, the eye of Horus came to symbolize sacrifice, healing, restoration, and protection. This was emblazoned on boats, homes, jewelry and funerary items to ward off evil, among other things.

Several centuries later, in the 1500’s, Pontormo’s Supper at Emmaus painting would feature a different eye of providence. This iteration would be closer to what we now think of, and was widely used among the Abrahamic faiths. This was an eye contained within a triangle surrounded by a glowing glory. In the Christian faith, the triangle is to represent the holy trinity, while the eye represents the omnipresence of God.

From here, this would see several prominent uses in art, architecture, and faith. Eventually bringing us to 1776, when the first committee convened to design a seal for the new American nation. The committee's members were Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, with Pierre Du Simitiere serving as artist and consultant.

Of the four men involved, only Benjamin Franklin was a Mason, and he contributed nothing Masonic to the committee's proposed design for a seal. Du Simitiere, the committee's consultant and a non-Mason, contributed several major design features that made their way into the ultimate design of the seal, including the shield, E Pluribus Unum, 1776 in roman numerals, and the eye of providence in a triangle. For Du Simitiere the single eye was a well-established artistic convention for an 'omniscient Ubiquitous Deity' in the medallic art of the Renaissance. He collected art books and was familiar with the artistic and ornamental devices used in Renaissance art. From here it could be easily surmised that this same history and usage is what led freemasons of the time to adopt the eye's use as one of our fraternal symbols.

Nevertheless, even after this, Congress declined the first committee's suggestions and eventually two more committees were convened before a final design was settled upon. The second in 1780 and third in 1782. The third committee finally producing a design that satisfied Congress. Francis Hopkinson, consultant to the second committee, added several ideas that eventually made it into the seal; white and red stripes within a blue background for the shield, a radiant constellation of thirteen stars, and the olive branch were all his contributions.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to the current seal came from his layout of a 1778 \$50 colonial note where he used an unfinished pyramid in the design. Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, and William Barton, artist and consultant, borrowed from earlier designs and sketched what became the seal we know today. According to Thomson and Barton, the seal's explanation was that the pyramid signified strength and duration while the eye over it & the motto, allude to the many interpositions of providence in favor of the American cause.

From here, it seems that the Masonic use seems to start to appear after the creation of the seal. The first documented official use and definition of the all-seeing eye as a Masonic symbol seems to have come in 1797 with *The Freemasons Monitor* of Thomas Smith Webb, wherein he wrote: "And although our thoughts, words and actions, may be hidden from the eyes of man, yet that All-Seeing Eye, whom the Sun, Moon and Stars obey, and under whose watchful care even comets perform their stupendous revolutions, pervades the inmost recesses of the human heart, and will reward us according to our merits."

Besides the subtly different interpretations of the symbol, it is notable that Webb did not describe the eye as being in a triangle. Jeremy Ladd Cross published *The True Masonic Chart or Hieroglyphic Monitor* in 1819, essentially an illustrated version of Webb's *Monitor*. In this first depiction of Webb's symbol, Cross had illustrator Amos Doolittle depict the eye surrounded by a semicircular glory, not a triangle. The all-seeing eye therefore appears to be a rather recent addition to Masonic symbolism. It is not found in any of the older constitutions, written from about 1390 to 1730. The eye, sometimes in a triangle, sometimes in clouds, but nearly always surrounded by a glory became a popular Masonic decorative device in the latter half of the 18th century. Its use as a design element seems to have been an artistic representation of the omniscience of God, rather than a secret symbol or calling card.

The misinterpretation of the seal as a Masonic emblem may have been first introduced in 1884 when Harvard professor Eliot Norton wrote that the reverse of the great seal was ‘practically incapable of effective treatment; it can hardly, (however artistically treated by the designer), look otherwise than as a dull emblem of a Masonic fraternity.’ This appears to have stuck in the minds of collective consciousness and a myth was born.

The Great Seal and Masonic symbolism grew out of the same cultural milieu. While the all-seeing eye was popularized in Masonic designs of the late eighteenth century, it did not achieve any sort of official recognition until Webb's 1797 Monitor.

Whatever status the symbol may have had during the design of the Great Seal, it was not adopted or approved or endorsed by any Grand Lodge. The seal's Eye of Providence and the Mason's All Seeing Eye each express divine omnipotence, but they are parallel uses of a shared icon, not a single symbol.

Source: This program is based on a short talk bulletin called “THE EYE IN THE PYRAMID” written by Worshipful S. Brent Morris, Past Master of Patmos Lodge #70, Ellicott City, Maryland. The material was expanded and edited for use as a spoken program by Bro. David Dubois, Senior Warden, Tuckahoe Lodge 347. 6/3/21.