Book Review

NEWELL, Aimee E., Hilary Anderson Stelling, Catherine Compton Swanson, Curiosities of the Craft—Treasures from the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts Collection (Boston, and Lexington, MA: Grand Lodge of Masons in Massachusetts and the Supreme Council 33°, Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite, Northern Masonic Jurisdiction, 2013), 288 pp., $44.95, Illustrated, Hbk, ISBN 978-1-889541-00-6.

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Curiosities of the Craft—Treasures from the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts Collection is a modern take on the traditional printed museum catalogue, detailing 150 handpicked objects and documents from the collection of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. After an illustrated introduction, telling the dramatic history of the collection, each object is presented with a photograph and description. The content of the book is loosely grouped under five conceptual chapters: ‘Traditions and Roots’, ‘Ritual and Ceremony’, ‘Gifts and Charity’, ‘Brotherhood and Community’ and ‘Memory and Commemoration’.

Most of the main collection (consisting of around 10,000 museum items and documents) is now housed in Lexington, in a combined heritage centre consisting of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library and the Lexington Heritage Museum. This explains why the catalogue is a collaboration between staff at the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. However, with more than half of the entries written by Dr Aimee Newell, preface and introduction included, the catalogue is a great personal contribution to our field by this scholar. Newell and her colleagues take care to present the objects in a clear and accessible way and the publication is provided not only with scholarly footnotes but also an index, of which one generally has to do without where masonic museum catalogues are concerned.

Though larger museums usually accompany permanent and temporary exhibitions with erudite and tasteful catalogues, one is less spoilt for modern equivalents where masonic collections are concerned. Les Trésors du Temple—Le Musée belge de la Franc-maçonnerie (Jeffrey Tyssens, ed. Brussels: Fonds Mercator and Musée belge de la Franc-maçonnerie, 2006) is one of the few contemporary publications comparable in length and quality with Curiosities of the Craft. Both museums have chosen different ways of presenting their objects, for while the Les Trésors du Temple concerns itself with the macro-cosmos of freemasonry and consists of chapters telling ‘stories’ illustrated by objects, in Curiosities of the Craft it is the micro-cosmos of the objects that dictate the stories. The short, well-written descriptions and photographs form separate windows through which the reader catches different glimpses of American freemasonry, from the colonial era to the mid-nineteenth century. With such a fantastic collection it is easy to understand why focus must be on the objects: there is for example the photograph (a Daguerrotype, to be precise) of a man who became a freemason in 1791-92 (p. 57), or the story of one of the legendary White House’s
foundation stones (also dated 1792), presented to the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts by President Truman during the renovation of the building in 1952 (p. 68). My favourite is the little piece of non-descript fluff that would have been worthless, had it not been for the attached note stating that it is a piece of chair-upholstery padding that once had the honour of supporting George Washington’s derrière while he was Master of Washington Lodge No. 22 (p. 223).

Throughout the work the writers’ fascination with the history of collecting shines through, and great pains are taken to find out what value these objects held for their original owners and later collectors. Major themes, such as the patriotism of the young American republic (e.g. pp. 21, 22) or the impact of the anti-masonic feelings of the late 1820s and beyond (e.g. pp. 12, 117, and 184) can be discerned through the carefully researched histories of these objects.

That the publication has an American perspective on the objects it presents is of course only proper. Nevertheless, there are examples throughout the catalogue where objects could have been placed in a wider geographic context, for example a masonic certificate (p. 23) presented in the catalogue as being designed by Paul Revere. Here, for example, I would also like to have been told how the design, almost in its entirety, is a reversed version of the Moderns Grand Lodge of England’s first printed certificates (the ‘Three Graces’ design by J. Cartwright), in use for more than half a century from 1757 to 1809.

An interesting question is whether a printed museum catalogue can compete with cross-searchable, digital online catalogues, such as the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library’s own? For research purposes, the answer is probably no. In this particular case, a quick investigation showed that not all objects treated in _Curiosities of the Craft_ figure in the museum’s online catalogue, and those that do seem to have much less information available online than in print. It is to be hoped that, in due time, the new research presented in _Curiosities of the Craft_ will somehow enrich the online catalogue.

Apart from containing new research, there are other reasons for investing in this publication: few books (and no online catalogue) are as seductively stylish as _Curiosities of the Craft_. Set against a black background, a splendid chair is placed not in the centre of the cover but unexpectedly to the side, its edge disappearing with the sleeve inside the book. It is very cleverly done: the impulse to ‘follow the chair’ and open the book is irresistible. There, on the inside of the cover, the hidden other half of the chair forms an abstract flourish that accompanies ‘the blurb’. Maureen Harper, collections manager at the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum, and Julia Sedykh Design, could not have used David Bohl’s superior photographs in a more effective way. Making up as they do roughly half the pages of the book, the beauty of the photographs and their clever use are of great importance for the overall success of this publication.