Editorial:
Material Culture and Art in the Lodge Room

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The second issue of this year’s Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism is again a thematic one, focusing this time on different aspects of material culture and the esthetic features of lodge rooms. What specialists in the study of freemasonry and fraternalism all know, but non-specialists are hardly aware of, is that there is a vast array of artefacts that freemasons and other ‘fraternalists’ have produced over many centuries to support the ritual activities within the lodge rooms. Indeed this treasure trove ranges from the most banal of paraphernalia to top-level works of art all made for this purpose of supporting ritual activities within lodge rooms. They constitute a historical patrimony which is adequately valued in a number of contexts, but this is by no means always the case. In a series of countries, masonic museums have played an important role in the preservation of these objects, not only purely masonic ones for that matter. And some private collectors do support this conservation of the patrimony too, gracefully contributing to expositions and putting their treasures at the disposition of scholars for book illustrations and the like. However, it is clear that a lot of material still lays dormant in cellars and

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attics, sometimes of lodges and other fraternal structures themselves, badly stored and menaced by the unmerciful passage of time, dust, moisture and vermin. Or the presence of masonic or fraternal patrimony at large can remain unnoticed, old wall paintings being covered by newer layers of paint or wallpaper of diverse esthetic qualities.

But interest in the material culture of fraternal life and for the esthetic features lodges developed throughout their history is growing. One of the signs of this awareness is the disposition of some public authorities to support their conservation and even to help fund expensive restoration projects. A good example is surely the restoration of the monumental Egyptian temple of the Rue du Persil lodge building in Brussels, the location of the series of masonic paintings studied in this issue by art historian Eugène Warmenbol. It is an excellent example of the ways freemasonry could inspire painters to produce high art with complex symbolical references, or in this case, paintings that simply proved to be among the best the artists concerned ever made. But things could be more small scale, as is shown by American art historian Margaret Goehring’s study of the wall paintings of the Elisha Gilbert house in New Lebanon, New York, where a disaffected lodge room of the early republic was found. This is not an isolated case however, as Goehring shows, but it is one of the most complex and interesting examples and has remained little studied in its entirety until now.

Surely, a lot of the material in use in lodges does not belong to highbrow art, quite to the contrary, a lot of everyday objects were in use just as well. These tokens of the material culture of fraternal life are quite vulnerable and most of the time were not preserved, once they were no longer of any practical use, e.g. after the dissolution of the lodge that possessed them. This, in part, is what makes the small collection of Rideau Lodge, on the Canadian frontier in Ontario, so fascinating. In his study of the material culture of this lodge, Forrest Pass shows how lodges operating in this particular context became consumers that purchased objects, seeking remote suppliers or finding items nearby, and put these artefacts to use for their specific ritual purposes. Production could be much more specific though. The very theatrical nature of Scottish Rite freemasonry developed within the United States notably led the Supreme Council of the Northern Jurisdiction to contract for the design of costumes for ritual performance. As Aimee Newell shows, these costume designs ranged from the quite simple to the very elaborate and definitely constitute one of the most striking esthetic features of American masonic patrimony.

Clearly, this thematic issue comprises a considerable number of illustrations which we want our readers to fully enjoy. The journal’s
printed edition only allows for black and white reproductions which do not fully enable the viewer to appreciate at full value the paintings, costume designs and objects studied by the contributors. On the journal’s website pages however, our readers can view the colour illustrations that grace this special issue. Whichever way you choose to read this issue, we hope you’ll find a fascinating account of the paintings, costume and designs that have thus far graced freemasonry’s history.