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The Patron Saints and the Point within the Circle

An Interview with David Long

In this issue, our journal's Editor, Shawn Eyer, FPS, interviews Worshipful Brother David Long, MPS, Master of John J. Mercer Lodge Nº 290 in Omaha, Nebraska, about his recent project to commission a beautiful new painting of the classic Masonic symbol of the Patron Saints and the Point within the Circle. Artist Roy Mandell's vivid illustration of this traditional Masonic theme unites the symbols of the Point within the Circle, the Parallel Lines, the Holy Bible, the Holy Saints John, and the Three Steps, within a landscape that includes the River Jordan and the Temple of Solomon.

A numbered, limited-edition lithograph reproduction of this painting, signed by the artist and suitable for display in Masonic temples, is available. To learn more about obtaining copies of this impressive rendition, visit <http://www.pointincircle.com>.

The Patron Saints and the Point within the Circle

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID LONG, MPS

SHAWN EYER TALKS WITH A LODGE MASTER WHO COMMISSIONED A BEAUTIFUL NEW PAINTING OF A MYSTERIOUS EARLY MASONIC THEME

David Long is the sitting Master of John J. Mercer Lodge N^o 290 in Omaha, Nebraska. One of the many projects he has led as Master was to commission a new fine art painting of the popular Masonic theme of the Point within the Circle and the Holy Saints John. He graciously agreed to be interviewed by our editor.

W.: Bro.: Long, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed about the production of this new painting. Can you tell us how you developed the idea for a new Masonic art print?

Thank you, W.: Bro.: Eyer. I am glad to do it. The idea for the painting was conceived long before the idea for the print. There is that spot in our lectures where it says, “in every regular and well governed Lodge there is represented a certain Point within a Circle.” I looked around the lodge and didn’t see one. I thought, “Aren’t we a regular and well governed Lodge?” I resolved then in my mind that, if it ever came to pass that I sat in the East, the lodge would be getting a fine representation of a Point within a Circle. Originally, the idea was just to have a painting made—to participate in and enjoy the creative process with the artists and to have my representation hang in lodge. But

as the early drawings from the artists came in, I posted them on Facebook. I began to get requests for prints. I realized that there are a lot of lodges with the same deficit that I had observed in my own, and I thought it would be a great thing for Masonry to make the image more widely available. Also, I had decided at the beginning of my year to concentrate my efforts on fundraising.

So, it became an opportunity to raise funds for your lodge?

Yes. After the costs for producing and delivering the prints are subtracted, all proceeds are to be split fifty-fifty between the lodge and the artists. I am happy with this arrangement, both for the lodge and the those who created this painting.

It is an opportunity to help the lodge and reward the artists and help Masonry all at once. It is particularly fitting to do something like this now, because this year is our 100th anniversary.

Can you tell us a little bit more about your lodge? Is the original painting hanging there now?

Yes, the original painting is hanging in the East, on the Master’s left, behind the Secretary’s



The Patron Saints and the Point within the Circle

Roy Mandell and Maggie Schmidt

oil on canvas, 2014



Worshipful Brother David Long, Master of John J. Mercer Lodge N^o 290, A.°F.° & A.°M.° of Nebraska.

desk. It looks great there, and it's an immediate eye-catcher. It already seems like the lodge room would be incomplete without it.

As for John J. Mercer Lodge N^o 290, our Masonic temple is beautiful in its own right, if a bit older. It has an arch used by the York Rite bodies. Additionally, there is a balcony like in a theatre. The balcony's railing depicts the Square, Compass and Letter G in various arrangements, as well as a Keystone and the emblem of the Order of the Eastern Star. In poking around the temple, I once came across a mysterious shaft under a trap door. Our Lodge room is also particularly big with high ceilings, so even though the painting is very large, it is well-proportioned in the room.

I'm guessing the brethren really admire it!

They love it. My Facebook friends love it too. Ill.: Bro.: Bob Davis said that "It's a rare thing to create a new piece of traditional Masonic art. That is what has happened here. It may one day hang in many Lodges." Jeva Singh-Anand said, "Simply stunning. And who said there's no great art in the twenty-first century?"

I originally suspected that some would love it while some might not so much... but really everyone loves it! When I showed the first images to W.: Bro.: Ralph Erts, who received his sixty year pin this year, he was as excited about it as I was. We probably discussed the virtues of the painting for two hours. Bro.: Alan Straub, W.: Bro.: Roger Manley and others from my Lodge have all praised the painting highly.

Bro.: Anthony Guida, one of our newest initiates, commented that he feels that it has brought a new sense of pride to the lodge. W.: Bro.: John Dimon recently commented that it brings a presence into the lodge almost like a living organism.

The other day our lodge was visited by the Master and other senior officers of nearby Bellevue Lodge N^o 325. The first thing they did when they entered the lodge room was ask about the painting and go up to give it a close examination. This image resonates in the heart of every Mason. He knows it ought to be visible in any lodge.

You mentioned before how the Entered Apprentice lecture calls for a Point within the Circle to be represented in every good lodge. Going past that, how did you decide to bring in all of the other elements in this painting, such as the Holy Saints John?

Well... of course the lecture says the Parallel Lines represent the Saints John, and in older versions

of this image they are often represented next to the glyph. But I also thought that including them would help to give us a deeper means of expression. Once you put in a human figure, there are many avenues for the artist to creatively explore: the facial features, expressions, and the stances. Since representations of the Point within a Circle often feature the Saints John, I saw this as an appropriate way to let the artists add layers of expression. More unusual in the work is that it is against a landscape background. That gave us the opportunity to include other imagery to contextualize the primary symbol within the Craft degrees.

It also gave us an opportunity to represent the Saints John as a reflection of that duality—nature and revelation. In the first degree lecture, we are informed that the two great books of Nature and Revelation are our “spiritual, moral, and Masonic trestle board.” I see John the Baptist as an appropriate symbol of nature because of the ascetic

lifestyle he lived in the Judean wilderness. And I associate John the Evangelist with revelation owing to his sacred writings. I asked the artist to try to express this duality both in the figures and in the background. The idea of putting them in a landscape anchors the work in the traditions of the Renaissance, when artists used such backgrounds, often behind the Madonna and child, often to imply the inner being and the outside world, near and far. And that’s exactly what we have done here. I thought it would be fitting if we had some symbols in the background that expressed an initiatic journey through the degrees. That is how I got the idea of including the sheaf of wheat and the Temple of Solomon in the distance.

Another duality connected with the Patron Saints is their solar symbolism, in that the Saints’ feast days are so near the summer and winter solstices. Like most historic commentators on the subject from Preston onward, that leads me to see



The Patron Saints and the Point within the Circle hanging in the East of John J. Mercer Lodge № 290 in Omaha, Nebraska.



Artist Roy Mandell begins the underpainting in the Schmidt Mandell Studio in rural Nova Scotia. Reference images attached to the canvas help guide the composition.

a solar aspect to the Point within the Circle. The use of gold leaf can be seen as evoking a deeper connection to this symbolism.

We could go further, but I hesitate to do so because I want people to see these things in their own way. The details of the vegetation and landscape I left mostly to the artist, other than specifying that I wanted a stream and trees representing nature and the subconscious and feminine side of man on one side, and a more austere landscape on the other representing revelation, the rational mind, and the masculine side of man. Of course, this arrangement is heavily informed by Kabbalah which—as many will know—many early Masons viewed as a kindred science. But I certainly didn't direct the artist to place this bush here, or that there. I was lost in how to portray the feeling that I wanted, but luckily Roy was not. He knew just what to do, and he did it wonderfully.

The result is certainly the finest picture of these symbols that I have seen. Did you study many of the other renderings during the planning?

Definitely. When I looked for images to show the artists in order to communicate the overall idea, I noticed that the majority of images were not really what I wanted. I mean, I was kind of surprised to discover that a painting like this didn't already exist, at least that I could find available online. The representations that I did locate had room for improvement. The simplest were nearly stick figures, while others had a sort of comic book style. I don't want to denigrate prior attempts, but I felt there was a lot more that could be done. So I came to feel that the time had arrived for a more considered rendering. I thought that by having the background and the Patron Saints in a fully-developed oil painting along with the main symbol, we could capture many layers of meaning that the Craft degrees infer.

This is a mysterious symbol, one that is in many ways ambiguous. And the painting is designed to allow the viewer to explore that mystery.

In developing a precise design, did you work with any other brethren?

Well, I asked the opinions of others—you chief-est among them. But mostly, it was all done by a constant communication between me and the artists. Many of the elements that you see were communicated to the artists by me. But what surprised me was what they brought to it.

They are not Freemasons. Yet, they spontaneously added the Three Steps—which just happens to be one of the hieroglyphical emblems of the Master Mason degree. That path that you see in the picture was also an elaboration of theirs. A little shadow also appeared on Solomon's Temple, which I asked them to keep for symbolic reasons. Also they researched images of the Saints John and foliage from various Renaissance artists. We discussed what I liked in what images. At one point I asked them to extend John the Baptist's garment to cover his right knee for symbolic reasons.

Are there any particular features in this new painting that should be pointed out?

I am not sure how much to point out. After all part of the fun is discovering these things for yourself. I would say look at the Bible and the Temple and there is a secret for those who have eyes to see. Also a different mood from left to right, in which a sort of duality is very much intentional. And one should have a certain journey going from the foreground to the background.

Tell us more about the artists who produced this impressive work.

They are a couple: Roy Mandell and Maggie Schmidt. I didn't know them previously. I found them with the help of www.custommade.com.



Artist Maggie Schmidt doing some detail work on the underpainting at an early phase of the project.



After the canvas was geometrically masked by Roy Mandell, 24-carat gold leaf is applied by artist Maggie Schmidt to the Point within the Circle and the Parallel Lines. This created a luminous—and symbolic—effect for the final work.

But I have come to know them pretty well in the course of the project. Maggie has a bit of a Masonic connection, as she had been a Rainbow girl and her dad was a Freemason. I think Roy did most of the painting, and Maggie did most of the communicating. I know them to be sweet and modest people. They are good-natured and incredible craftsmen. In addition, Roy has a particular love of the Renaissance period. He uses Renaissance techniques in all his paintings. And he has a most impressive résumé, having taught at various institutions and done lots of exhibitions.

They certainly did magnificent work. I don't believe I've ever seen this theme treated so tastefully before.

I have to agree! I noticed right away that Roy had a love for the material and a really amazing level of technical skill. I think it was the water in the

first rough sketch that first told me I was going to get more than I bargained on with this painting. I was astonished how he was able to intuit the symbolism. I had kind of wanted the central symbol in gold leaf, for example. But the artists suggested it before I got a chance to mention it. There was really a great connection.

You mentioned the artist having incorporated the steps. Is there anything else that surprised you when you looked at the painting later?

As the painting was progressing, I spent many hours studying it. And on occasion, things would catch my eye that I had not noticed initially. I think this is a sign that it has some real greatness. For example, one day the geometry of the composition became conscious for me. The fact that the plane is divided almost in half diagonally by the vegetation

forming in essence two right triangles. This felt so Masonic to me. Not just because of the right triangles, but it really reminded me of all the talk in the middle chamber about mean proportion and so on. We have lots of really interesting things that are going on geometrically in the painting. Triangles, vertical lines and so on.

Similarly, one day I was looking at it and I noticed how the vegetation almost seems to form a Byzantine-style halo around John the Baptist's head. Another time, I noticed that dirt in the stones suggested almost the opening of some kind of cave. Like a "cleft of an adjacent rock," suggesting an allusion to the underworld and to Plato's cave.

There are many other features in the painting that pose questions like this. What does the expression on the Baptist's face mean? Is that patch of earth indicating a cave? What does that mean?

When a painting poses questions, it draws the viewer in. It awakens an urge to contemplate and reflect. As you once told me, Shawn, very rightly: that is what a piece of esoteric art should do. And this painting does it. If you look at the painting long enough, it will ask *you* lots of questions, and you will find yourself looking still longer and pondering potential answers.

Thank you very much for sharing your insights with the readership of the Philalethes Society. Where can the prints you mentioned earlier be obtained?

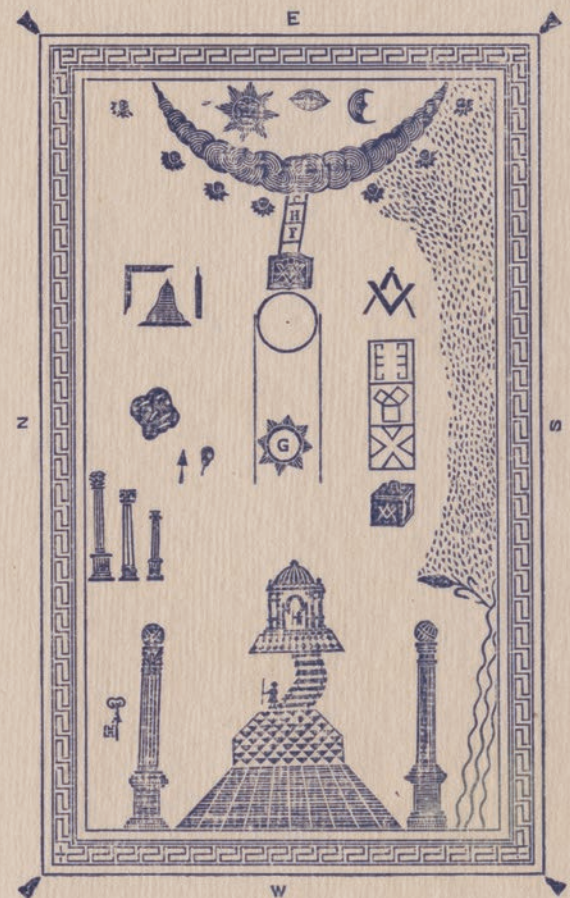
Thank you, Bro.: Eyer. We have high quality, signed lithographic prints available on our website at <http://www.pointincircle.com>, and all of the proceeds are equally split between the artists and John J. Mercer Lodge N^o 290.

ORIGINS OF THE SYMBOLISM

The first-known reference to the Point within the Circle or *Punctum* is in the 1721 Dedicatory Epistle of Eugenius Philalethes, Jr. (Bro.: Robert Samber). The Parallel Lines were also an early symbol, appearing for example in the 1730 exposure, *Masonry Dissected*. They may not have been originally connected to the Point within the Circle, but the two Parallel Lines were closely identified with the Holy Saints John.

The close association with the Point within the Circle between Two Parallel Lines and the altar, as seen on a number of early Bible pedestals and as depicted on most traditional tracing boards of the Apprentice degree, probably inspired the description found in the American Preston-Webb and British Emulation lectures. While the presence of the Bible—and Jacob's Ladder rising from it—confuses some, it is perfectly understandable from this perspective.

—Shawn Eyer, FPS



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