

The Wayfarer - A Painting by Hieronymus Bosch

Article by W. Bro. Rob Lund

In a previous newsletter, I provided a book review of "A Pilgrim's Path", which had a picture, on the cover, of the painting by Hieronymus Bosch called "The Wayfarer". This painting, shown on the next page, is also known as "The Pedlar" or "The House of ill Fame" and was painted in the year 1510. There are actually two paintings by Bosch called "The Wayfarer", and they are similar.

The meaning of this painting has ever puzzled art students over the centuries. Much of his paintings are inspired by a kind of pessimistic Christianity, and the spiritual perils of life. Both paintings seem to indicate the escape from the evils of life.

However, as a Mason, you will recognize symbolism in this painting that others would not.

The first clue is the gate, which is very unusual. Who would create a gate like this? The symbol of a square is plainly visible as a Masonic device and leads the viewer to look further. There are also Pythagorean triangles in this gate. Look at the painting. What do you see?

Did you notice that the left heel is slipshod? And that the right knee is "bared and bended"? And that his right foot forms a square?

Looking further up, the strap that holds his backpack is not in a usual position, such as his shoulders, but lies in a place where, in some American rituals, would be a cable tow.

Moving further up, he has on his head not a hat, but some cloth resembling a hood-wink. This, by the way, is how a hood-wink was originally used: a cloth from the headgear is pulled over the face and tied from behind. Ever heard the expression: "to pull the wool over some-one's eyes"?

On his hat is a tool, which could be a plumb-line. This is symbolic in the degree of an Installed Master.

Look at the window panes of the tavern: the one on the right seems to be broken in the shape of a Tau cross; the one on the left looks like a heart torn out of it.

The owl in the tree above him is an unusual sight during the day. The owl usually symbolizes wisdom.

Since the light is shining on the traveler, from the south, he is moving from the West to the East—again very Masonic.

He is leaving behind a rude and crude world, as can be seen in this scene, escaping spiritual dangers, and is about to move through the squared gate on a narrow path to a more appealing destination.



The image is too small to see any details in the background, but there could be further symbolism there. There may also be symbolism which can only be determined by concordant Masonic bodies such as the Royal Arch and Scottish Rite.

If so, I'd be pleased to hear about it.