Mystery and Benevolence
Symbolic Expressions of the Masons and Odd Fellows from the American Folk Art Museum
Mystical, evocative, and sometimes simply strange, the art of fraternal practice is rich in symbols that are oddly familiar yet strikingly uncommon. Through arcane and alluring artifacts, Mystery and Benevolence brings to light the histories of the Freemasons and the Independent Order of the Odd Fellows, two fraternal secret societies with deep roots in American history. The almost two hundred carvings, textiles, sculptures, and adornments that constitute this exhibition were used from the late eighteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, and retain their clandestine allure to this day.

Whether regarded as “secret societies” or “societies with secrets,” American fraternal groups arouse endless curiosity about their ceremonies, ritualized performances, and recitations. These practices, many borrowed and adapted from ancient Egypt and biblical Christianity, are kept hidden from outsiders, and lend an aura of exclusivity and brotherhood to its members. The “mystery and privilege” of these brotherhoods are also transmitted through secret systems of hand grips, gestures, and passwords that are thought to originate in the Middle Ages. Cryptic symbols, hieroglyphs, rituals, and vows of secrecy cloak fraternal orders in an opaque otherness that separates them from society while also binding their members in a system of shared belief.