

MYSTERY AND BENEVOLENCE

MASONIC AND ODD FELLOWS FOLK ART



TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE



INTERNATIONAL
ARTS AND ARTISTS



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The enigmatic objects on view assume a profound and affecting sincerity, even as their highly charged imagery fascinates, puzzles, and compels.

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 over eighty 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.

1. Artist unidentified, *Masonic Past Master Jewel*, 1825, Silver gilt, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez



FREEMASONS AND ODD FELLOWS

Freemasonry is thought to derive from early groups of stonemasons in Scotland and England during the Middle Ages, and was introduced into the American colonies by the 1720s. Its tenets, grounded in ideas drawn from stonemasons' regulations, Enlightenment philosophy, and Judeo-Christian teachings, resonated with the ideals of the new nation. A number of America's founding fathers reached the higher levels of Freemasonry, including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Paul Revere. The Odd Fellows fraternity began as an amalgam of members from diverse trades. It is not known exactly when the Odd Fellows order was founded in England as a benevolent society, but like the Freemasons, they still exist today.

Despite their celebration of brotherly kinship, nineteenth-century fraternal groups followed contemporary exclusionary cultural norms when they defined "brotherhood." In 1843, Peter Ogden, a black sailor who had joined the Odd Fellows in England, founded the African American counterpart—the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows—in the United States. (African American men had already established their own American Masonic groups by the late eighteenth century.) *Mystery and Benevolence* gives us a glimpse into the arcane world of these fraternal orders through compelling and cryptic artifacts, such as esoteric symbolic charts and richly embellished ceremonial axes and aprons.



2. Artist unidentified, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Axe for Brandywine Lodge No. 388*, 1852–1900, Paint and gold leaf on wood, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez

3. Published by Currier & Ives, *Grand United Order of Odd Fellows Chart*, 1881, Lithograph on paper, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez



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115 NASSAU ST. NEW YORK

GRAND UNITED ORDER OF ODD-FELLOWS CHART.





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4. Artist Unidentified, *Scottish Rite Double-Headed Eagle Carving*, 1870, Paint and gold leaf on wood, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez
 5. Artist Unidentified, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Third Degree Banner*, 1882, Paint on silk, with bullion and metal, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez

VISION AND VIRTUE

Although we may know the mission and values of the Freemasons and Odd Fellows, we still find ourselves asking, “Why were they created, and why do they endure?” *Mystery and Benevolence* examines some of the main tenets of these fraternal orders—Charity, Fellowship, Labor, Passage, and Wisdom—through works that illustrate these virtues. Elaborately stitched costumes and gilded regalia were used to teach these tenets through allegorical lessons and rituals aimed at new initiates.



ALTRUISM

Freemasons held charity as one of their “Grand Principles” of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth. The Odd Fellows, founded as a benevolent society, was especially explicit about its charitable aims and instructed members that their duties included burying the dead, relieving the distressed, visiting the sick, and educating orphans. In 1851 the Odd Fellows was the first fraternity in the United States to create a sister organization, the Daughters of Rebekah. Members were known for their charitable actions and humanitarianism, and aimed to “Live peaceably and do good unto all, as we have opportunity and especially to obey the Golden Rule...”



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6. Artist Unidentified, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Plaque*, 1850, Paint and gold lead on wood, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez
 7. Reason Bell Craftt, *Masonic Master Mason Apron*, 1855–1865, Ink, paint, and gold paint on leather, with silk binding, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez
 8. Artist unidentified, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Bow and Arrows Plaque for First Degree*, 1860–1900, Paint and gold leaf on wood, with metal, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez



SYMBOLISM

Both the Freemasons and Odd Fellows adhered to a system of morality and ritual that was akin to a religion—and was similarly replete with ceremonial clothing, icons, allegory, and symbolism. This visual language is only fully understood by a fraternity’s own members, but this exhibition gives us a privileged view of artifacts, both handcrafted and manufactured, that hint at its richness and mystery: intricately embroidered ceremonial aprons, handcrafted staffs and signs, jewelry and emblems that are surreal yet grounded in tradition. Curious and captivating, the objects in *Mystery and Benevolence* hail from the “golden age” of fraternal brotherhoods, when American folk art and decorative art were brought together to confer a sense of legacy, status, and belonging in a newly established country.



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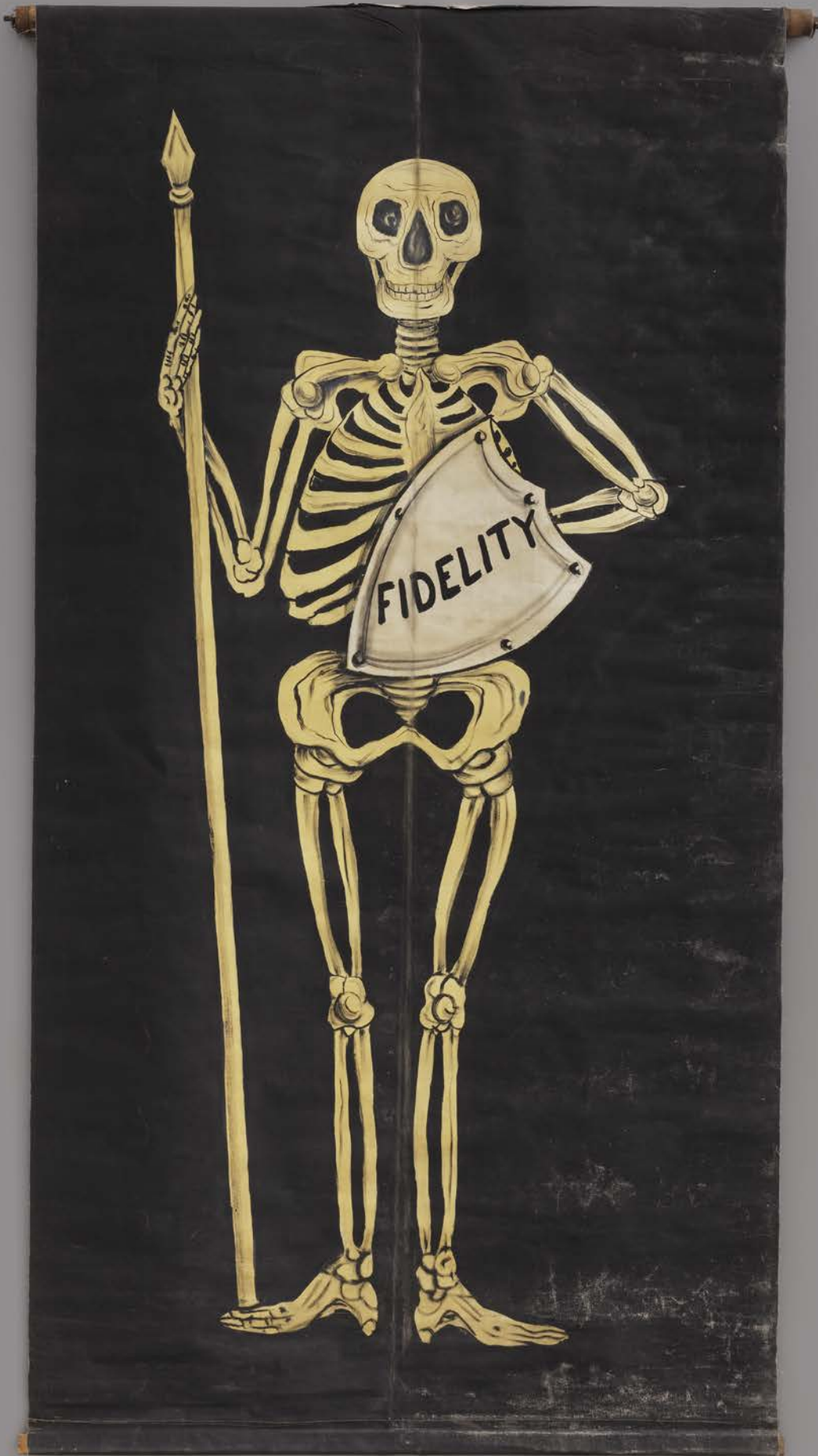
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9. Artist unidentified, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Sword with Scales*, 1850–1900, Paint and gold leaf on wood, with metal, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez
10. John Haley Bellamy, *Masonic Shelf Clock*, c.1870, Wood, glass, and metal, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allan Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez





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11. The Ward-Stilson Company, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Inner Guard Robe*, 1875–1925, Velvet, cotton, and metal, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez
12. Attributed to a French Prisoner of War, *Masonic Pendant*, 1793–1815, Paper and watercolor on ivory, in metal case with glass, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allan Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez



ABOUT THE AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM, NEW YORK

The American Folk Art Museum is the premier institution devoted to the creative expressions of self-taught artists, past and present. Since 1961, the American Folk Art Museum has been shaping the understanding of art by the self-taught through its exhibitions, publications, and educational programs. As a center of scholarship, and by showcasing the creativity of individuals whose singular talents have been refined through experience rather than formal artistic training, the museum considers the historical, social, and artistic context of American culture. Its collection includes more than eight thousand artworks dating from the eighteenth century to the present—from compelling portraits and dazzling quilts to powerful works by living self-taught artists in a variety of mediums.



13. Artist Unidentified, *Masonic Knights Templar Shade*, 1875,
Paint on canvas, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra
and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez



FRONT Artists unidentified, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Heart in Hands Staffs* (detail), 1850–1900, Paint and gold leaf on wood, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez
BACK Artists unidentified, *Independent Order of Odd Fellows Heart in Hands Staffs*, 1850–1900, Paint and gold leaf on wood, American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Kendra and Allen Daniel, Photograph by José Andrés Ramírez

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works

Approximately 80 objects

Requirements

Moderate security;
Approximately 3,000 square feet

Organized by

The American Folk Art Museum,
New York

Shipping

IA&A makes all arrangements;
exhibitors pay outgoing shipping costs within the contiguous US

Booking Period

12 weeks

Tour

September 2021 –September 2024

Contact

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