

**DEATH HEADS AND CLASPED HANDS**  
**By John D. Beatty, GC**

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## **The Lecture**

### **I. Introduction**

### **II. Symbols, Allegories, and Signs**

- A. Symbol – represents the unknown or stands for something greater than itself
- B. Allegory- something that changes the unknown into something that is known
- C. Sign – something that is known with no added meaning

### **III. Heads and Heavenly Figures – Popular in early New England**

- A. Death's Head – Memento Mori
- B. Father Time
- C. Soul Effigy
- D. Angels
- E. Adam & Eve

### **IV. Neo-Classical Movement – Urns as Symbols of the Soul**

### **V. Heraldic and Portraiture**

### **VI. Pennsylvania German forms – Less symbolic, more decorative**

- A. Tulips – three points symbolize Trinity
- B. Moons and Stars – Crescent as a boat carrying soul to afterlife
- C. Hearts – Love of God for mankind
- D. Ur-bogen – Mystery of life
- E. Angles – Fruits of the spirit, not menacing

### **VII. Plants as Symbols – Romantic Movement rejecting earlier rationality**

- A. Willows – universal symbol of mourning
- B. Roses – everlasting love and beauty of the soul, often on women's stones
- C. Lilies – innocence, purity, virginity
- D. Other flower assortments
- E. Trees (esp. oaks and acorns symbolize strength, eternity)
- F. Stumps – Rustic Movement, naturalistic, a life "broken off"
- G. Vines – Jesus, "I am the True Vine"
- H. Grain – Popular with Masons, has a Eucharistic element for the Host

### **VIII. Animals**

- A. Lambs – innocence, frequently on the graves of children
- B. Doves and butterflies – Spirit or soul
- C. Pelicans – Symbol of Christ's self-sacrifice

D. Dogs - Loyalty

## **IX. Anatomy**

A. Hands

1. Hand of God pointing downward
2. Clasped hands – matrimony, farewell to Earth
3. Finger pointing heavenward
4. Hands in blessing, especially Jewish stones

B. Eyes – Eye of God

C. Hearts - Love

## **X. Architectural elements**

A. Broken columns – a life cut short

B. Obelisks – Eternal Life

C. Gates and curtains – Gates of heaven

D. Empty chairs – loss of a loved one

E. Lamps and menorahs – soul's immortality, intellectual enlightenment

## **XI. Other**

A. Anchors – “Anchor of the soul,” a cross symbol, not always nautical

B. Ships – symbol of the church, more often nautical

C. Anvils – blacksmiths, St. Eligius, God's Creation of Universe

D. Crowns – kingship, Christ the King; York Rite Masonry when shown with cross

E. Musical instruments – psalms, harps have Irish meaning

## **XII. Christian symbolism**

A. Crosses – Most common symbol of Christianity, many different types

B. Chi-Rho – ancient symbol of Christ

C. HIS – Iesus Hominum Salvator, Jesus Savior of Men

D. Alpha-Omega – Symbol of Jesus, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.”

E. INRI – Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, the sign on the Cross.

## **XIII. Fraternal symbols**

A. F.A.&M. – Free and Accepted Masons

B. A.F. & A.M. – Ancient Free and Accepted Masons

C. AAONMS – Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine

D. AASR – Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite

E. R.A.M. – Royal Arch Masons

F. K.T. – Knights Templar or York Rite Masonry

G. IGGCRSM – International Grand Council of Royal and Select Masons

H. O.E.S. – Order of the Eastern Star

I. Square and Compass with G in center – Most common Masonic symbol

J. All-seeing eye – symbol of the Internal Order of Odd Fellows, also Masonic

- K. Cross and Crown – York Rite Masonry
- L. Scimitar and crescent – Nobles of the Mystic Shrine or Shriners
- M. Five-pointed Star – Order of the Eastern Star
- N. F.L. and T – Fellowship, Love, and Truth, symbol of the Odd Fellows
- O. F.O.E. – Fraternal Order of Eagles
- P. F.C.B. – Friendship, Charity, and Benevolence, symbols of Knights of Pythias
- Q. K of C – Knights of Columbus
- R. Stump with Wreath – Woodmen of the World, “Ducem Tacet Clamet.”
- S. “Liberty, Unity, Benevolence, Concord,” Royal Order of Foresters
- T. “T.O.T.E.” Improved Order of Red Men
- U. Elk Symbol – Protective Order of Elks
- V. Moose – Loyal Order of Moose, Purity, Aid, Progress “P.A.P.”

#### **XIV. Military Associations**

- A. G.A.R. – Grand Army of the Republic (Civil War)
- B. Circle with sun radiating – American Legion
- C. Eagle with Lex Regit, Arma Tuentur with Maltese cross – Military Order of Loyal Legion – Civil War officers’ organization

#### **XV. Other Symbols of Mourning and Faith**

- A. “Simply to Thy Cross, I Cling”
- B. Sleeping children in beds

#### **XVI. Recent symbols – More Whimsical**

- A. Cars
- B. Teddy bears
- C. Customized headstones

#### **XVII. Conclusion – Icons as Art**

- A. Try to place gravestone in its historical context
- B. Be careful not to over-interpret the stone