

Behind the Scene – Austria No. 2044

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Austrian Masonic “gathering” for a stamp sheet in 2006. The painting is by Ignaz Unterberger (c.1748–1797), created in 1789. One source states: “From 1782 Ignaz Unterberger was a member of the Freemason’s lodge New Crowned Hope.” He is not shown in our “accredited” lists (Denslow, Wikipedia), but he could have been overlooked. Apart from this one statement, we have not been able to confirm his ever being a Freemason. Nevertheless, many of his paintings contained Masonic symbols.

The section used for the actual stamp

is outlined. The actual stamp sheet is shown on page 50. The painting title is, *Initiation Ceremony in a Viennese Masonic Lodge during the Reign of Joseph II (1789)*. The stamp title is “Freemasonry in Austria.”

It is a Class I, Government issue Masonic stamp, and we are all pleased to see such stamps. A casual look at the stamp tells one that it is a Masonic gathering of some sort, but the form of a lodge meeting is implied with ritual (two separate rituals?) in progress.

Not a lot makes sense in the painting from a practical Masonic point of view,

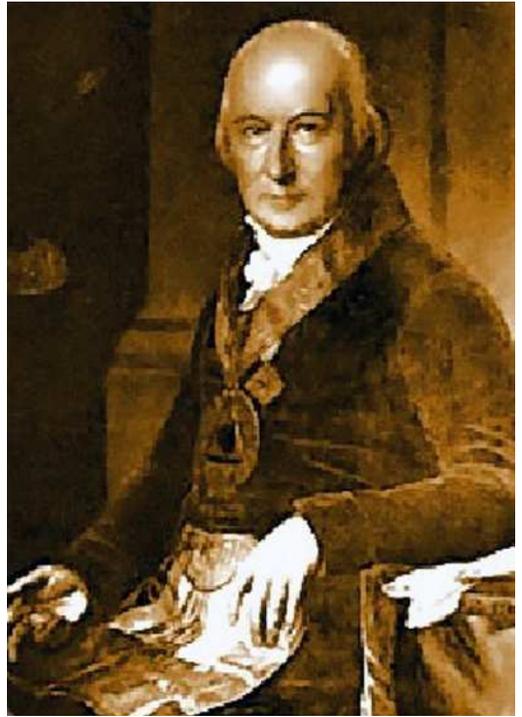
and the reason here is simple: It is a painting of a scene in a stage play. You can see the curtains being drawn by the man on the extreme right. It is definitely not as the painting title states, except with the knowledge of a stage play. Also, it is not a depiction of “Freemasonry in Austria” as the stamp states.

The play was called *Die Freymaurer* (Lady Mason), and it was by Friedrich Ludwig Schroder. He was a German playwright, actor, dramatist and a prominent Masonic leader. The image seen here shows him in his Masonic regalia. The play is about a woman who pretends to be a man and tries to join the Masonic Order. She is finally compelled to reveal who she was when told about the proofs she would have to endure—confronted by a glowing sword and human skull. If you examine the stamp you can see the sword and skull on the table at the upper left (detail from the stamp is shown on the right). The play was staged at the Imperial Theatre in Vienna in 1785 as part of the celebration at the consolidation of several Lodges and the creation of the Lodge of New Crowned Hope. The occasion is set out in the book *Mozart's Operas* by Daniel Hertz (page 257).

The artist, Ignaz Unterberger, apparently attended the play and later painted the scene we see.

With stage plays, one can expect exaggerations, frivolity, and even satire. If you look closely at the painting, all of these aspects are evident—enormous ashlars, sense of disorder, members brandishing swords, and so forth.

All Freemasons will immediately see that the central figure in the stamp (the lady candidate) is wearing a blindfold,



Friedrich Ludwig Schroder



Stamp detail showing the sword and skull.

but is inappropriately clothed; no doubt to accommodate the plot.

Studying the painting in detail reveals many Masonic-related anomalies, but they are not worth addressing because the scene is one of fantasy to begin with.

Some Freemasons might be a little surprised that a play of this nature and a painting from a scene were created, especially given the playwright was a Freemason, and the artist may have been such.

The reason is that the play does not show a Masonic meeting, but a parody of

such where essentially “anything goes.” The painting, as it is of a scene in the play, is therefore equally invalid. The playwright and the artist were at liberty to do anything they wanted to do as nothing Masonically meaningful was being disclosed. Generally speaking, the stamp belongs in the performing arts category rather than Freemasonry.

How the painting got selected for the stamp design if Masonic officials were consulted is a good question. It appears everyone simply thought it looked fine— just as we did when the stamp was first issued.



The sheet and stamp issued by Austria entitled “Freemasonry in Austria.” It is plain to see that the individuals are all actors—highly diverse in appearance and obviously “acting.” As to the skull on the back table, skulls are used in lodges in some countries as a symbol of mortality, beyond that they have absolutely no other significance.