



Secret society

Description

There exists a secret society, custodian of the theory and practice of secrets. Its adherents embrace the systematic invention, application and promotion of codes and ciphers. As it includes architects and mathematicians amongst its adherents, this society preserves and embeds arts of semiotics, geometry, combinatorics, indices, logics, riddles, paradoxes, and mechanisms to examine the arts of secrets.

Its more adventurous adherents will debate covert operations: how to create spaces in which you can secrete yourself, objects or other spaces, and will advance the practices for restricting and enabling access. It investigates how to use space to hide messages in a building or urban space as if an extended *topo*-mind to be interpreted by others.

It's not Freemasonry

No secret society has to do the things I've just suggested, but if secrets are its *raison d'être* and *modus operandi* then a researcher might expect the society to have some purchase in a kind of *topo* or *arche*-cryptology, especially if it's founded on myths and rituals about Solomon's Temple, and in which its [Early Masonic Catechism](#) refers to God as "thou great Architect of Heaven and Earth" (22).

Being secretive puts any organisation at a disadvantage. If a secret society admits to being founded on the idea of "secrets which must never be written" that works against developing a vibrant scholarly tradition or collective memory. Freemasonry offers texts about numbers and codes, and harbours vast archives of writings about its history and practices, but it's left to others to advance theories or applications of the covert, secretive, hidden or cryptographic.



In its early days in the 17th century, Freemasonry incorporated the pre-Enlightenment idea of the memory theatre, the way an orator would memorise the key points in a speech by associating them with an imaginary room layout. That's interestingly spatial and architectural, but it implies a legacy in oral tradition rather than writing – secrets passed on by word of mouth, though written texts inevitably intervene.

Secret wrapping

I've read (actually listened to) historian John Dickie's *The Craft: How the Freemasons Made the Modern World* as an audio book and probed the *Handbook of Freemasonry* and other sources. In spite of its fascinating history, periods of persecution, political intrigue, infighting and influence, and a rich pantheon of adherents (Mozart, Voltaire, Goethe, Washington, Conan Doyle, Kipling) Freemasonry's main strength was that it offered the benefits of club membership in a formal setting, offering companionship at its mostly male gatherings.

Participants in its anachronistic, funereal cosplay were united by the idea of secrets. After his careful historical account, Dickie offers a more casual summary of the movement in an article in [Time](#),

“Masonic rituals consist of secrets, wrapped in secrets, wrapped in secrets. Once the wrapping is removed, what is revealed are moral principles of utterly disarming banality. Be a nice fellow. Learn more about the world. Remember that death puts things in perspective. The great secrets of Freemasonry are all motherhood and apple pie.”

Dickie shows that secrets serve as a recruiting tool. People are lured in to discover its secrets. Some also want to join clubs that offer barriers to entry, a variant of the sentiment expressed by Groucho Marx: “I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member.” Secrets also keep people together. Like families, organisations can bond by agreeing to keep their secrets, even if the secrets are just about its rituals. Dickie wrote:

“Masonic secrecy is not a way of hiding anything at all. It is the wrapping, and not what it contains, that is key. Secrecy is a way of enveloping bonds of fellowship in solemnity and sacredness.”

I can now reveal the secret of the lodge. According to the [Early Masonic Catechism](#) a freemason may not disclose any of the masonic secrets “unless to a True and Lawful Brother” (197). That presupposes you know who is a “brother” when outside the bounds of the lodge. It’s tempting to say that the secret is that there is no secret. But the main covert asset of the lodge is who is in it within its fraternal embrace.



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Notes

- Snoek explains the various initiation rituals. Of architectural interest perhaps is the installation of the initiate into a darkened room, and then a transition to the company of the assembly, and perambulation following the pattern of a labyrinth: "The candidate now perambulates the lodge-room three times. Traditionally, the first and third perambulations were clock-wise while the second one went anti-clock-wise, as in the traditional form of the labyrinth (the 'Troja-castle'). The perambulations go round the 'tableau', in English referred to as the 'tracing board', a drawing of symbols on the floor in the centre of the lodge" (323). Mostly, the architecture of Freemasonry involves providing a stage setting for the rituals.
- An article in [Wired](#) reports the long process of decoding a 150 year old encrypted document purported to be from Freemasonry. The reward for the effort was to reveal the conduct of a particular initiation ritual. Imagine forming a sect around an inconsequential ritual that I chose to make secret - coded it as an encrypted text, locked it in a box and buried it to be discovered in 150 years. Would a movement form around the great mystery that I put toothpaste on my electric toothbrush every night; brushed for 3 minutes; then I flossed, followed by a poke with an Interdent and a rinse?
- The [General Regulation of a Free-Mason](#) or its successors don't reference secrets, or a requirement that membership be kept secret.
- Secrets abound in the [Early Masonic Catechism](#) which recounts the initiation oath: "I Hereby solemnly Vow and Swear in the Presence of Almighty God and this Right Worshipful Assembly, that I will Hail and Conceal, and never Reveal the Secrets or Secresy of Masons or Masonry, that shall be revealed unto me; unless to a True and Lawful Brother, after due Examination, or in a Just and Worshipful Lodge of Brothers and Fellows well met. I furthermore Promise and Vow, that I will not Write them, Print them, Mark them, Carve them, or Engrave them, or cause them to be Written, Printed, Marked, Carved or Engraved on Wood or Stone, so as the Visible Character or Impression of a Letter may appear, whereby it may be unlawfully obtain'd. All this under no less Penalty than to have my Throat cut, my Tongue taken from the Roof of my Mouth, my Heart pluck'd from under my Left Breast, them to be buried in the Sands of the Sea, the length of a Cable-rope from Shore, where the Tide ebbs and fiows twice in 24 Hours, my Body to be burnt to Ashes, my Ashes to be scatter'd upon the Face o f the Earth, so that there shall be no more Remembrance of me among Masons. So help me God." (197-198).
- Images on this page are of Mary's Chapel, Edinburgh, identified as the recent home of the first Freemason Lodge. The building was designed by architect George Angus as a 'Subscription Baths and Drawing Academy,' and was purchased by the lodge in 1893 (

<http://www.lodgeofedinburgh.org.uk/pages/visit.html>) but the lodge records go back to 1599. Its headquarters are now in George Street.

- By the end of the 19th century there were over 600 secret societies in the USA alone, as indicated by the title of the book (available at forgottenbooks.com): Stevens, Albert Clark. 1899. *The Cyclopaedia of Fraternities: A Compilation of Existing Authentic Information and the Results of Original Investigation as to the Origin, Derivation, Founders, Development, Aims, Emblems, Character, and Personnel of More Than Six Hundred Secret Societies in the United States*. New York, NY: Hamilton Printing and Publishing.
- Dickie mentions the Loyal Order of Water Buffaloes. I'm glad he did as I also had in mind the iconic Hanna Barbera family show [The Flintstones](#) (1960).

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