

NEWS

WANT TO BID ON A JERSEY SIGNED BY MARADONA?

Built in 1879, the Freemasons' Hall at 23a Coleman Street was last renovated in 1975. Now, its Singapore members want to give the heritage building a makeover, including building a second Masonic Temple.

They are raising funds by holding a memorabilia auction on June 19 (today) afternoon, of what organisers tout as Singapore's largest ever sell-off of famous memorabilia — including tennis gear signed by Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer, boots signed by Pele and Cristiano Ronaldo, jerseys autographed by David Beckham, Maradona and Pele, and guitars signed by BB King, Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones.

Mr Robin Rawlings said the "renovation would preserve the existing ancient building for future

generations, as well as provide the sort of things you might get in a social club ... The main Temple is in use almost every evening; (there are plans for) a second Temple."

Asked if the Masons here had plans to modernise, Mr Brian Henry said: "We have computers, websites, electric lighting, air conditioning and among our members are professionals who are as up-to-date as any in the world. The members are the ones who make a lodge."

The auction will be held at The Hilton from 2pm to 5pm on June 19 (today). Items can be viewed from 1pm.

Tickets are \$30 at the door. There will be a complimentary wine tasting.



Inside the Inner Sanctum ...

From pentagrams to secret handshakes and a gory oath, what's real and what's not about the Freemasons?

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THERE were three wooden chairs, shaped like thrones, at the end of the room that serves as the Temple. Were a lodge meeting in progress, the head of the Masonic lodge, the Worshipful Master, would be seated on the highest of these.

But as the room was empty of people in the 45 minutes I was granted an exceedingly rare peek into this space sacred to Singapore's Masons, much was left to the observer's fancy. The popular imagination on Freemasonry, certainly, has been luridly fuelled by author Dan Brown's latest book *The Lost Symbol*, which opens with a skull filled with wine.

Sometimes described as the world's oldest fraternity, Freemasonry counts presidents, kings and geniuses in its ranks. It traditionally uses arcane symbols and rituals, a proclivity that has led to wildly exciting theories about world domination and supping with the devil.

My first impressions of the Temple at Freemasons' Hall in Coleman Street were rather more modest. Some of the items therein, one might find in a church: A Bible, a pipe organ and a domed ceiling with a sky mural, traditionally an allusion to the heavens.

The regal-cum-religious overtones were, to me, a little Narnian — almost right out of CS Lewis' Christianity-inspired fantasy world whose heroes are English-waifs-turned-royals.

Heightening the effect were Masonic regalia, displayed in glass cases outside the Temple. According to Mr Michael Seet, the current Worshipful Master of Sir Stamford Raffles Lodge No 7444 EC, during meetings members wear "tuxedos, aprons, white gloves, collars and insignia" denoting their Masonic office. The members of 33 lodges, chapters and other Masonic groups in Singapore also meet at the Temple regularly.

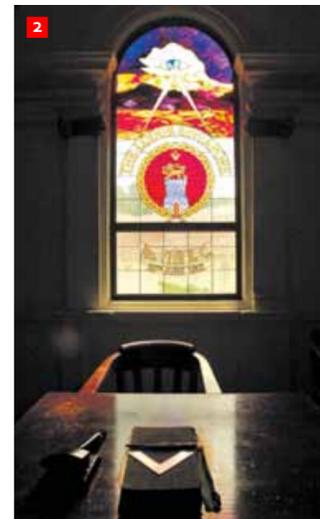
Apart from the restaurant on the ground floor, the building is not open to the public. And, yes, it remains a fraternity — while women these days can use the bar, they cannot join Freemasonry (which consists of Lodges, Chapters and Side Degrees).

'G' STANDS FOR ...

So, as they were now granting Temple access to me, a female outsider — Masons' wives are sometimes invited into the inner sanctum for a peek — could it be the Freemasons, popularly viewed as keepers of secrets and mysteries, were opening up?

Inside, symbol seems to pile upon symbol. A classic Masonic black-and-white chequerboard is at the centre of the Temple floor. In a second meeting room, also adorned with a chequerboard floor, a gavel is prominently displayed.

A silver letter "G" hangs from the ceiling in both rooms. The "G", said Mr Brian Henry, 78, a Mason for 35 years, has "never been defined; it's whatever you deem it to be. It could be God, it could be Geometry. It's a reference to the



1. The second meeting room, which can be used for Masonic meetings that are usually held at the Temple. The black and white squares are a Masonic feature. 2. Inside the second meeting room. 3. The bar at Freemasons' Hall is not open to the public. 4. When a lodge meeting is held there, the Worshipful Master sits on the tallest chair in the group of three chairs in front. 5. Inside the Masonic temple. PHOTOS: KOH MUI FONG

Supreme Being".

Freemasons have to believe in a god — any god. To an outsider, it may seem paradoxical that discussion of religion and politics is forbidden in the Lodge but religious holy books can be used in ceremonies that include performances and lectures with a moral message.

As for Geometry, it has been described by Masons as the "noblest of sciences"; the square and the compass are Freemasonry's most identifiable emblems, said to represent judgement and discernment. Such symbolism goes back to the Order's origins in the guilds of stonemasons who built Europe's mediaeval cathedrals and churches.

In the modern incarnation, the fraternity is about 300 years old and some five-million strong worldwide. Its three central tenets are brotherly love, or fraternity; relief, or charity; and truth.

'IT'S NO SECRET SOCIETY'

The movement came to Singapore in 1845. Today, there are about 750 Masons here, all

male and mostly professionals.

Singapore's founder Stamford Raffles and George Washington are among the many eminent figures who were Masons — though Mr Henry, a past Master at Sir Stamford Raffles Lodge, declined to say which famous Singaporeans are Masons, as it could be "sensitive" information.

In charitable Masonic spirit, the Sir Stamford Raffles Lodge raised \$70,000 this year for the benefit of organisations like the Dover Park Hospice. Worldwide, however, Masons have had to grapple with bad press — such as accusations of corruption and conspiracy — sparked by its secrecy-shrouded rituals.

Clearing the air, Mr John Wilson explained: "It's not a religion, it's not a substitute for religion and it's not a secret society." A past Master and a Mason since 1961, he has held many Masonic titles including a current one that, at first, set off Dan Brown-type alarm bells in my head: The Provincial Prior of the Masonic order, the Knights Templar, in South-east Asia.

Mr Wilson, 72, declared there were effectively no secrets in Freemasonry. "If you went to Coke international in the US and said, 'I would like your recipe for what you put into Coke', would they give it to you? It's a secret, right? There are commercial and literal secrets.

"But in Freemasonry, there are no secrets because you can find out everything you want about it on the Internet, (though) there's always people who make things up."

FACT OR FICTION?

I asked Mr Henry if the initiation rite into Freemasonry included such details — reported elsewhere — as the candidate unbuttoning his shirt to reveal his left breast, rolling up his left trouser leg, being blindfolded, with a noose around his neck, and asked to repeat an oath with the point of a dagger placed on his breast.

"I'm not saying true or not, but it's traditional," he replied, cryptically.

I also asked if the oath reportedly un-

dertaken by would-be initiates did indeed contain fearsome penalties like having "my throat cut across, my tongue torn out by the roots, and my body buried in the rough sands of the sea at low watermark".

The short answer: No, they don't use the old oath anymore.

No secrets revealed, so far. Another Mason, Mr Banerjee Shiva Prasad, described it this way: "We have some things that are private, like families have things that are private."

For instance, there are ways of identifying fellow Masons, whom it would be their duty to help — such as if one fell on hard times — said Mr Wilson, adding the caveat that the support would not be at the expense of the civil or moral law.

Those interested in joining the exclusive group have to approach members and undergo a months-long screening process. For those with obviously self-serving interests, the answer is no. Said Mr Henry: "We ask every (would-be) member, what do you expect to gain? If he says 'networking', he's out."

What does a modern-day Singaporean get out of being a Mason that he doesn't from his social club membership? Calling it "mentally stimulating", Mr Wilson said: "I'm a member of SICC, Tanglin Club, the Cricket Club, Raffles Marina ... mainly for personal enjoyment ... which is totally different from Freemasonry, which is dedicated to a way of life. It's much more of a spiritual concern."

Asked about the Masons' use of ambiguous symbols such as the pentagram and the "all-seeing eye", Mr Henry disavowed any connection with the occult: "For me, (the former) is just a five-sided figure. And all the dollar bills in the US have an all-seeing eye, so it can't be that evil, can it?"

For the record, the pentagram is an ancient symbol that took on occultic connotations only in the 19th and 20th centuries, long after Freemasonry was established.

Should Freemasonry give itself an update and get contemporary? Part of its appeal lies in its vital mystery, said Mr Henry: "If you change it, you'll change the mystery of it."

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