

**For Immediate Release**

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**“Inspired by Fashion: American Masonic Regalia”  
Now Open  
at the  
National Heritage Museum**

Ever wonder about the funny hats, elaborate aprons—or even the Hawaiian shirts—used by members of Masonic fraternities? For decades, popular television programs and movies have poked fun at these groups by featuring characters that belong to made-up fraternities with goofy names and even funnier hats and costumes. In the real world, members and non-members alike have often perceived Masonic costume as weird, silly, or outlandish. Freemasonry, in fact, provided much of the inspiration for the costumes, rituals, and symbols used by most fraternal groups—both real and imagined. “Inspired by Fashion: American Masonic Regalia” at the National Heritage Museum takes a deep look at the Masonic costume tradition as a way to better understand how Freemasonry has long intersected with daily life.

Masonic regalia—the symbolic clothing that members wear, including aprons, fez, and character costumes—does have an element of wackiness. Yet, we may think the same thing about the clothing we see in historic prints, paintings and photographs from the 1700s and 1800s. Then, as now, fashion itself was as eccentric, if not more so, than the regalia that Masonic groups wore. When we compare Masonic costumes with everyday clothing from the same time periods, we can see that regalia manufacturers often took their cue from popular fashions.

“Inspired by Fashion” presents garments and images from the National Heritage Museum collection, and explores the ideas behind Masonic regalia and costume. Each section in the show delves into a source of inspiration—contemporary fashion, the military, Orientalism, and the theater—to show the connections between Masonic fashions and everyday style over the centuries.

**Sartorial Brotherhood**

Over the centuries, American Freemasonry has continually adapted to reflect the interests of its members. During the early 1700s, Freemasonry experienced a tremendous upsurge in popularity among many classes of men, in part because its values of parity and

brotherhood resonated with supporters of American independence. Mid-1700s men's clothing, both everyday attire and that worn in the lodge, was relatively simple and unornamented, echoing this cultural interest in equality. Yet Freemasons wished to set themselves apart by what they wore and the materials used, so their regalia followed the genteel style that the fraternity's gentleman founders favored. For example, Masonic aprons were made from soft, supple lambskin, rather than the durable cowhide of most workmen's aprons.

### **Marching as Brothers: Military Inspiration**

When the Civil War began in 1861, it profoundly affected all aspects of American life and culture, including fashion. Military-style clothing became the vogue. From the mid-1860s through the end of the 1800s, Masonic regalia—and even women's fashions—incorporated epaulettes, piped seams, and tailored silhouettes. After the war, many Freemasons joined the Knights Templar, a Masonic group that modeled itself on the Christian soldiers of the Crusades. Other Masonic groups also formed “military” sections. Joining a fraternity, particularly one with a military-style uniform and activities filled a void that many war veterans felt.

### **The Playground of Freemasonry: Eastern Inspiration**

After the Civil War, improved transportation opened the Middle East to many American travelers. These journeys prompted an interest in exotic design inspired by the Islamic world. Even those who could not make the trip could achieve the “feel” by wearing fashionable Middle Eastern-style clothing. Founders established the Masonic group, the Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, or Shriners, in 1872, at the height of this American interest in the Middle East, called Orientalism. They took cues for their name, symbols and regalia from the popular fascination with all things Oriental. By 1905, the group had 100,000 members in 46 states.

### **The Masonic World's a Stage: Theatrical Inspiration**

Now, as in the past, after a man becomes a Master Mason at his local lodge, he can choose to join a number of other Masonic groups, including the Scottish Rite and the York Rite. After the Civil War, perhaps inspired by the American craze for historical pageantry that began around 1900, both groups rewrote their ceremonies to be much more involved, requiring theatrical costumes, make-up and props.

### **Masonic Regalia Today**

Over the course of the fraternity's existence, Freemasons developed and retained their regalia to suit both the organization's needs and prevailing fashions. For Freemasons, Knights Templar, Shriners and others, the traditional costumes are part of who they are,

reflecting the group's values and helping to maintain its unity. Today, Masons still wear aprons and sashes in their lodges. These items have become a type of "fossilized fashion." Now members think of this regalia as traditional, and greet any change with resistance. These garments help to identify members and to inspire pride amongst them. And Masons continue to adapt contemporary clothing to fit the fraternity—down to their Hawaiian shirts and bathrobes!

The National Heritage Museum is dedicated to presenting exhibitions and programs on a wide variety of topics in American history and popular culture. The Museum is supported by the Scottish Rite Freemasons in the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction of the United States. The National Heritage Museum is located at 33 Marrett Road in Lexington, at the corner of Route 2A and Massachusetts Avenue. The Museum is open Wednesday through Saturday from 10 am–4:30 pm. Admission and parking are free. For further information, contact the Museum at (781) 861-6559 or visit the web site at [www.nationalheritagemuseum.org](http://www.nationalheritagemuseum.org).