

ALL HALLOWS' EVE SYMBOLS



W A T E R H O U S E S Y M B O L I S M N E W S L E T T E R # 7 6

SPECIAL SYMBOLS

- Broken tree limb conveys mortality versus immortality
- Owl conveys watchfulness, wisdom or contemplative solitude
- Witch conveys the occult, magic and secret powers
- Skull with wings conveys passage of time

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HISTORY OF ALL HALLOWS' EVE

All Hallows' Eve must be recognized that it is not a holiday that has been celebrated the same way over the centuries (therefore symbols change). It has been reinvented in different guises over the centuries and the best way to explore those subtle guises are to look at All Hallows' Eve in different cultures like Ireland, Great Britain, and the United States.

All Hallows' Eve have pagan origins even though its etymology is Christian because it is quite literally the eve of All Saints Day (November 1). It is also connected to Celtic festival Samhain or Samuin (pronounced sow-an or sow-in) meaning "when the summer goes to its rest". Before we had books, newspapers, televisions, computers and cell phones, the focus was much more on the changing of the seasons and how those changes affected our lives. The be-

ginnings of the celebration of All Hallows' Eve came from observing those changes.

Those beginning observations were based on the idea that evil spirits were responsible for blights and other problems related to the harvest. To ward off these evil spirits they set huge bonfires to invoke help from the gods. The beginning celebrations were thought as a festival of the dead and time of supernatural intensity heralding the onset of winter. Sir James Frazier sums it up well in *Golden Bough* (1890) when he wrote "the night which marks the transition from autumn to winter seems to have been of old the time of year when the souls or the departed were supposed to revisit their homes in order to warm themselves with the good cheer provided from them in the kitchen or the parlour by their affectionate kinfolk".



From a wonderful book that Caleb purchased for me at the Boston MFA of Mexican Day of the Dead posters

BROKEN THINGS

In this issue, we will look at many things that have symbols related to Halloween. The grave marker is for Captain William Warren who died September 28, 1850 at the age of 39 years, 3 months & 11 days.

It means mortality versus immortality because the top of the tree

will die but the bottom of the tree will live. Also, notice on the tree there are a couple of acorns which is a symbol of resurrection.

Even though the broken branch will die, the acorns will fall to the ground and will become new seedlings and eventually new trees.



Mount Warren Cemetery in Deer Island, Maine

C E M E T E R I E S

This painting by Jacob Van Ruisdael (Dutch, 1628/9-1682) is called The Jewish Cemetery, 1655-60 and is from the collection of The Detroit Institute of Arts.

Notice the dead tree and fallen over tree stump which is always a symbol of death and the idea that the person's life was cut short before they reached their prime.

The sarcophagi on each side of the painting are always symbols of death and decay.

The literal translation of sarcophagus is flesh eating.

The ruined building is a symbol of decay or how short one's life is here on earth.

A rainbow and clearing sky can be seen in the background which is a symbol of hope and eternity.

I just recently purchased a wonderful book on several European Jewish cemeteries called "Houses of Life" by Joachim Jacobs. This image is in the book.



D E A T H P O R T R A I T S

*Clothes
make a
statement.
Costumes
tell a
story.*

*~Mason
Cooley*

During the Nineteenth Century, it was the custom to ease the grief caused by the loss of family members through mourning rituals, observed during the initial period of death, when the bereaved family would formally view a portrait of the dead person.

This painting to the right is a posthumous portrait by the presence of the traditional mourning colors of red, white

and black, a keepsake book, and the threatening sky.

The boy, dressed in his best clothes—the manner in which deceased children were usually attired for burial—stands on the porch of his home holding his hat, as if in the act of departing from his family.

The painting is "Portrait of a Boy", 1856, attributed to James B. Read, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.



C R E A T U R E S O F T H E N I G H T (O W L S)

This stone owl is from Pere Lachaise Cemetery, in Paris.

In funerary art, the owl conveys watchfulness, wisdom or contemplative solitude. In different cultures, the owl was part of the burial process. In prehistoric European times, the owl bones were buried with the dead and

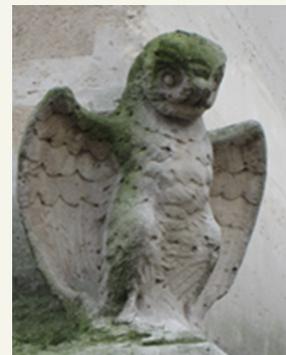
with the Northwestern Native American Culture, the imagery of the owl was thought of protector and guider in the underworld.

In the Ancient Greek culture, the owl conveys foresight because they can see at night. It is the attribute of Athena, goddess of wisdom

and war if it is to defend the home from outside enemies.

The owl is seen as a protector in the Ancient Greece culture and other cultures.

The owl is also linked to early cultures of Mexico and is seen in Day of the Dead celebrations.



CREATURES OF THE NIGHT (WITCHES)

The witch conveys the occult, magic, and secret powers. Witch hazel conveys a spell. I remember my grandparents having witch hazel in a bottle in their bathroom.

There was a bizarre article on Yahoo last year about how the Romanian Senate was trying to enact a witch tax and all fortune tellers and witches would have to produce receipts and they would be held liable for wrong predictions. The article goes on to say that Marina Campina, a well-

known witch, stated that it is difficult to tax witches and fortune tellers partly because of the erratic sums of money they receive. The law was voted down because the lawmakers were frightened of being cursed.

This painting is called *Witches* by Hans Baldung Grien, (c. 1484 - 1545), Woodcut (1508). He was a German painter and printmaker who was considered the most gifted student of Albrecht Dürer.



HARVEST ITEMS (JACK-O-LANTERN)

This watercolor on paper by Andrew Wyeth called "Jack Be Nimble", shows the mischievous side of the Jack-O-Lantern. It is named after the phenomenon of strange light flickering over peat bogs, called ignis fatuus or jack-o'-lantern.

Notice there are four pumpkins and the number four stands for solidity, comprehensiveness, intellect, and justice. Notice the moon to the left which conveys magic, intuition, and fantasy.

The carving of the Jack-O-Lantern does not come into being until 1866. In the United States, the carved pumpkin and Halloween become associated with the harvest and the beginning of winter.

The poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, born in 1807, wrote in his poem, *The Pumpkin*, "Oh!—Fruit, loved of boyhood—the old days recalling, when wood-grapes were purpling and brown nuts were falling! When wild ugly faces were carved into its skin, glaring

out through the dark with a candle within!"



I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion.

~Henry David Thoreau

DISGUISES

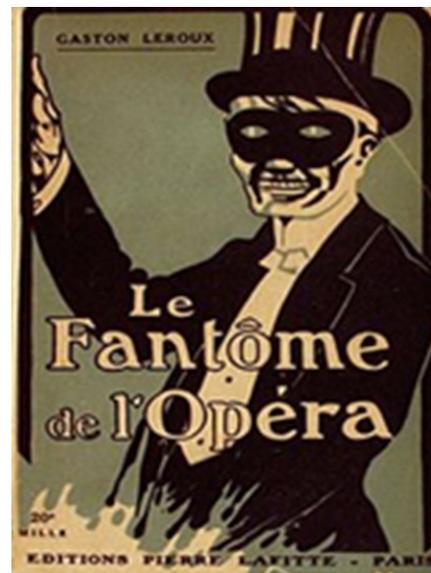
Disguises convey concealment or changing a person's physical appearance, including a wig, glasses, makeup, costume or other ways.

Camouflage is one type of disguise for people, animals and objects. Hats, glasses, change in hair style or wigs, plastic surgery, and make-up are also used.

One famous disguise of the late 20th Century (1986) is

from the very famous play the *Phantom of the Opera* by Andrew Lloyd which conveys evilness, escapism and another world. The poster to the right is from a 1920 edition.

If you have seen the play, you know the story is full of symbols such as death, the next world, darkness and evil.



What are your ideas
for future newsletters?



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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

As you can see by this newsletter, All Hallows' Eve is one of my most favorite holidays.

There are so many wonderful symbols connected to the holiday. I have also been able to curate an exhibition at the museum called "All Hallows' Eve" and it has been fun exploring the visual arts part of the holiday too.

Take care,

Richard Waterhouse

SKELETON (KISS OF DEATH)

Notice the skeleton head is kissing the life out the young man who has just recently died. He is a symbol of death here on earth—the young man succumbs to the kiss of death.

In early American colonial cemeteries (1650-1750), the skull is seen occasionally with wings which is a symbol of the fleeting passage of time. Later on, the skull is replaced by the hour glass which conveys life ending when the sands of time runs out. The most famous movie hourglass is in the Wizard of Oz and is turned over by the Wicked Witch of the West who explains to Dorothy that she will die when the stand runs out.

The gravestone is from Monumental Cimiterio, Milan, Italy. If you haven't visited this incredible cemetery, you should because the sculpture is amazing.

