



*“To be truly modern,  
one must first look  
for something truly ancient”*

## **An Interpretation of The Luke Mural & the relevance to Freemasonry**

By W.Bro Nicholas Dallat

Prince of Wales Own  
Lodge 154, Belfast  
Irish Constitution

## **Disclaimer**

I am not an art historian nor an art critic. The works of John Luke have been well documented and interpreted by many a more scholarly person than I.

This paper simply offers my interpretation of The Luke Mural, a little history on how it came to be, and what lessons it may offer us as Freemasons.

Further reading on John Luke & his works can be found in the bibliography of this paper & much is available online. I suggest that anyone will find study of his works a worthy and rewarding venture in itself; for they are truly fantastic.

## **Introduction**

I think it is fair to say that the significance of the Luke Mural (in masonic terms at least), has been somewhat overlooked for most of its life thus far.

Whilst being well known and highly regarded in the local art world, the significance of the Luke Mural has, to my knowledge, never really been fully explored from a masonic perspective.

Only since it was announced that the Provincial Grand Lodge Masonic Hall, within which the mural is situated was to be sold, did the brethren of County Antrim start to take notice of what was ultimately to be lost.

For the story of the Luke Mural is indeed that – a story of loss, but more of that later...

## John Luke

To understand the Luke Mural, we must first take a brief look at the man who conceived of it in the first place – the artist John Luke.

John Luke was born in 1906 and lived a mere 69 years on this earth, passing away in 1975.

He grew up in north Belfast, and like most young men of the era; he found employment at Workman, Clark & Co shipyard in the east of the city, working as a heater boy from the age of 14.



It is said that he had an uncanny thirst for knowledge and in his spare time could often be found in public libraries simply absorbing information.

In 1922 he was injured at work & thankfully for us, never returned to the shipyards. Instead, he found I suspect no less arduous work in a York Street Linen Mill until 1925.

During his time at the shipyard he displayed a natural talent for sketching and recorded many of the scenes around him, much to the admiration of his fellow workmen who encouraged him to enrol at the local collage and explore his artistic talent further.

So, in 1923, John did just that & enrolled in the Belfast Technical Collage evening art class and after his job in the mill ended in 1925, he went on to become a full-time student.

During his final year of art school, he won a scholarship to the London Slade School of Fine Art, where in 1930 he Completed his Diploma. He then returned to Belfast to work both as a teacher of art & as an artist in his own right.

It was during these formative years that John developed an appreciation for the styles & techniques of “the old masters”. Sometimes using truly ancient techniques and always with a focus on producing very finely crafted pieces of artistic work.

Even in his early work from the Slade Art School, one can see reimagining’s of classical subject matter quite apart from using classical techniques.

Below we see his reimagining of “Judith and Holofernes” made in 1929 whilst in London. The account of the beheading of Holofernes by Judith is given in the deuterocanonical *Book of Judith*, and is the subject of many paintings and sculptures from the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

In the story, Judith, a beautiful widow, is able to enter the tent of Holofernes because of his desire for her. Holofernes was an Assyrian general who was about to destroy Judith's home, the city of Bethulia. Overcome with drink, he passes out and is decapitated by Judith; his head is then taken away in a basket.



John Luke reimagines the classical tale & sets it in a modern context with a modern cast and it is no less disconcerting a depiction.

I reference this picture in particular as I believe it deals with some of the same issues as the Luke Mural. That of depicting something ancient in a modern way.

It must be said that this was in sharp contrast to the modernist way of thinking which came to ultimately dominate the art world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modern Art was progressive, it was about looking to the future & a new mechanical age, not I suggest about reimagining classical pieces.

Aside from subject matter, John Luke was more criticised for his absolute focus on technique and how long it would take him to physically produce an artwork.

Modern impressionism by was about making expressive marks on canvas. Quickly applying the paint to give a semi abstract impression gesture or of the subject.

John Luke was always more interested in fine lines, flat surface, proportion and contrast. His skill as a draftsman never subsided and he developed a style all of his own. This makes his work highly individual and easily recognisable.

As a result of his insistence on producing detailed & painstakingly slow pieces of art, the body of work which we are left with is comparatively small, and although diverse in content and media, it is of the utmost international quality.

Of the man himself, it is said that he was modest to the extreme. A quiet natured man, a deep thinker, uninterested in material possessions, accolades or fanfare, a vegetarian no less. A man devoted to & focused only on the exploration of his craft, who devoted little time to anything else.

Others are very kind and say that these traits are somehow John Luke's working-class values on display, instilled in him by his modest upbringing. This may be true, as first and foremost he thought of himself as just being a hard-working craftsman. I not sure he was ever fully comfortable with being called "an artist".

However, one imagines there was a certain stubbornness to John Luke. This can be seen in his resistance to modernism & the fashions of the day. In his insistence on making his own paint and crafting his works with so much rigor.

I suggest that if you twin John Luke's insistence on being "a craftsman" with his innate ability & form of self-expression; you get a personality which will happily work on a single subject for months on end.

It is fair to say that John Luke set himself apart from his contemporaries. For although there are artistic associations with other, perhaps more famous artisans of the era such as John Hewitt & Colin Middleton; John Luke trod his own, very narrow path and left us with some of the most ethereal and finely crafted artworks produced on the Island of Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

His paintings have a truly magical quality. They express figures and forms that are at once recognisable, but which sit in semi realistic, almost ethereal backdrops. Representing at times what I can only describe as dream like states.

## A Gift to the Province of Antrim

A new Provincial Masonic Hall was commissioned by the province of Antrim & subsequently designed & completed in 1965 at Rosemary Street, Belfast.

The foundation stone was laid by Major Rupert Stanley, PGM on 7<sup>th</sup> October 1954 & the opening ceremony took place on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1956, performed by The Most Worshipful Grand Master Raymond Brooke.

The design was provided by Young & Mackenzie Architects & as the architect JR Young was a leading freemason within the province at the time, it is perhaps no surprise then that the commission fell to his practice.

In fairness, at the time Young & Mackenzie were one of the most prominent architectural practices in the north of Ireland & had been so for over 100 years.

It is a sign of changing times perhaps, that the provincial masonic hall proved to be one of the last major commissions for the architectural practice.

As part of the building design, a mural was to be painted above the dais in the provincial grand lodge room & as a token of thanks, the architectural practice of Young & Mackenzie commissioned John Luke to complete the mural, which they then gifted it to the province of Antrim. John Luke was paid £375 for completion of the mural and it stands 31ft wide & 7ft tall. It occupies the space above the Provincial Grand Lodge dais at the front of the room.



The mural is a depiction of the building of King Solomon's Temple and is a three-piece wall panel painted in "tempera style" – an ancient way of hand mixing individual pigments with egg & resin. Early decorative examples of tempera can be found as far back as Egyptian times and was used extensively right through the middle ages up until the invention of oil-based paints.

John Luke had completed a perhaps even more impressive mural five years earlier at Belfast City Hall; depicting the “Granting of Belfast Royal Charter” & showcasing the key industries of the time.

So Young & Mackenzie certainly knew John Luke was up to the task & the quality of the work he could produce. A fine choice indeed for such a task.

## The Luke Mural from a Masonic Perspective



A mural depicting the building of King Solomons Temple, is (in itself) is not necessarily noteworthy.

The quality of the artwork and scale of the piece also speak for themselves and are undoubtably very impressive.

However, what caught my eye the first time I saw the mural was the content of the mural & the central composition in particular.

In the centre of the mural is a scene with four male figures reviewing plans of the temple which is being constructed in the background.

As an architect myself, I readily understood the scene. It is a site meeting, with all the key decision makers reviewing progress of the build. A familiar scene indeed to me, of something that happens on every building project.

The task at hand was thus to name the individuals, and as it turned out, that was where the deeper meaning & true relevance to Freemasonry is to be found.

The four central figures (reading from left to right) are as follows:

1. King Solomon
2. The Jewish High Priest
3. Hiram Abiff
4. The Chief Overseer

Note that 3 of the key figures have long tunics; I suggest indicating that they do not engage in operative masonry themselves. The chief overseer on the other hand has a shorter tunic, akin to the workmen in the background and does engage in operative work – that of inspecting the work brought up from the quarries.

In the craft third degree we learn that Hiram Abiff was sent by Hiram King of Tyre to assist King Solomon with the build. Hiram Abiff as we all know as being the architect who designed the temple & who was appointed to direct the workmen in the build.

Legend has it that Hiram of Tyre largely remained in his home country during the building of Solomon's temple, so we can discount him from the scene and indeed there is only one figure dressed in kingly attire.



As I said earlier, almost immediately I was struck by the fact that the scene has little to do with craft masonry, indeed I saw nothing that I recognised from any of the craft degrees. It was then that I realised that the mural may in fact related more to the Royal Arch branch of the order. The truth it turned out was somewhere in between.

In the scene the key figures are reviewing the plans of the temple and are arranged with King Solomon in a slightly unnatural, very open gesture, with his body facing forward, head to the side & holding his sceptre in his right hand and pointing to the plans with his left.

The Jewish High Priest is in perhaps the most prominent & central position with his captivating golden breast plate. This figure we can also name- as Zadok, the High priest at time of King Solomon's Temple.

There had always been a high priest, from the time of the Jewish exile from Egypt until destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> temple in 70BCE.

Aaron the elder brother of Moses is recorded the very first Jewish High Priest in the old testament.

The Jewish High Priest was only ever permitted to enter the Holy of Holies once a year & was required to wash his hands and his feet before performing any sacred act. They wore eight holy garments, of these, four were of the same type worn by all priests, and four were unique to the High Priest:

Those vestments which were common to all priests, were:

Priestly undergarments (breeches): linen pants reaching from the waist to the knees "to cover their nakedness".

Priestly tunic (tunic): made of pure linen, covering the entire body from the neck to the feet, with sleeves reaching to the wrists. That of the high priest was embroidered; those of the priests were plain.

Priestly sash (sash): that of the high priest was of fine linen with "embroidered work" in blue and purple and scarlet; those worn by the priests were of white, twined linen.

Priestly turban: that of the high priest was much larger than that of the priests and wound so that it formed a broad, flat-topped turban; that for priests was wound so that it formed a cone-shaped turban.

The vestments that were unique to the high priest were:

Priestly robe: a sleeveless, blue robe, the lower hem of which was fringed with small golden bells alternating with pomegranate-shaped tassels in blue, purple, and scarlet.

Ephod: a richly embroidered vest or apron with two onyx engraved gemstones on the shoulders, on which were engraved the names of the tribes of Israel.

Priestly breastplate: with twelve gems, each engraved with the name of one of the tribes; plus, a pouch in which he probably carried the Urim and Thummim.

It was fastened to the Ephod. On the front of the turban was a golden plate inscribed with the words: "Holiness unto YHWH".

Instantly I hope, any member of the Royal Arch branch of free masonry will recognise the associations with the colours & detailing of the High Priests clothing.

Of note is the Sacred Breast Plate of the High Priest. It contained 12 Precious Stones representing 12 Tribes of Israel and can be considered as 12 different letters set on a golden plate.

Some scholars suggest that light emitted from the various stone in particular order to spell out words or that the stones could in fact move to form sentences.

A pouch was set in the cloth behind the breast plate containing The Urim and Thummim, which were likely two differently coloured stones or pieces of wood.

The Urim & Thummim thus provided a means of divine communication between God & the High Priest. Gods direct line to his chosen people of earth was through The High Priest, his breast plate & the Urim and Thummim.

The Urim & Thummim could be used to provide divinely inspired answers to simple questions posed by The High Priest: Yes or No, Innocent or Guilty, If a couple should marry or not, even finding a guilty person in a crowd via continual deduction.

In the role of the High Priest, we see customs that have passed down into Freemasonry & in the Urim & Thummim I suggest we possibly could see the original source of the white & black bean.

It is interesting to note that although masonic halls are often called temples, in the blue lodge room at least, there is nothing resembling any physical similarity with King Solomons temple.

A Royal Arch Chapter room on the other hand is physically modelled on the inner sanctum of King Solomons temple. In the royal arch degree, one moves through the chapter room as the High Priest would have moved through the temple, one veil at a time.

We find a description of the Temple in 2nd Chronicles, Chapter 3, Verse 14;

*'One part of the door, approximately 7 ft. by 7 ft., of the Sanctum Sanctorium, or Holy of Holies, within which was deposited the Ark of the Covenant, was left open, but the interior was partly concealed by three sets of veils, coloured Blue, Purple and Crimson.'*

Behind the Ark one could see the three symbolic Grand Masters, (namely King Solomon, King Hiram of Tyre and Hiram Abiff).

Once again, here we can see the similarities from the description with a Royal Arch chapter room. Indeed, the colours and features as described in King Solomons temple are found most prominently within freemasonry in a Royal Arch Chapter room.

## Early Freemasonry in Ireland

In an attempt to tie these strands together, it is here that we will take an interesting sidestep & look briefly at the history of early Freemasonry in Ireland pre-1790.

By the time of 1790 Irish Freemasonry had already developed a 3 Degree System, just not quite the system we have now. The three degrees consisted of:

- 1<sup>st</sup> – Entered & Passed
- 2<sup>nd</sup> – Master Mason
- 3<sup>rd</sup> – Royal Arch (Included Both Josiah & Zerubbabel Legends)

Before 1800, the Royal Arch degree sat within the workings of the craft lodge. Largely it was used to depict repairs to King Solomon's Temple in the time of King Josiah although some workings of the Zerubbabel Legend also took place. The High Priest was the centre piece of the Chapter and it was he who directed the candidate “how to find the truth”.

It was the high priest who effectively ran the chapter and carried out the business of the convocation.

It was at the stage where freemasonry had fully transitioned away from its operative beginnings, but which had not fully developed into the system we have today.

Some 40 years later in 1829, Supreme Grand Chapter was established, and they introduced a few changes.

They changed the officers of a chapter (previously 3 Principles or Grand Masters, 3 Sojourners, 2 Scribes & 1 High Priest, into the current system we enjoy today of 1 Excellent King, 1 High Priest & 1 Chief Scribe.

They also changed the degree structure & enabled separation away from the craft lodge & provided clarity on what they termed their own “higher degrees”.

## Conclusion

Not being a mason himself, my suspicion is that John Luke must have wanted to understand his subject matter & thus researched masonry and its formative years.

My deduction is that the Luke Mural is pointing us towards an examination of “Ancient Craft Masonry”. For me, the mural acts as a jumping off point. A guide, a painting full of clues if you will.

It gives us clues to the original workings of our fraternity & lays out some of the key elements which are still with us today, some changed greatly, others as bright and vivid as John Luke’s own paintings.

In researching the early workings of Freemasonry in Ireland, one soon finds that the Royal Arch degree has always been considered the culmination of the masonic initiatic experience.

This is a statement that is still often made today, and typically relates to the explicit meaning revealed within the degree – that of having to descend to the depths to find that which was lost.

I suggest that the Luke Mural opens the door of the temple that little bit further, pointing towards an examination of the Jewish High Priest and the symbolism associated with his character.

To consider that the Jewish High Priest had an ability to communicate directly with God is profound, almost beyond comprehension.

To consider that they had divinely inspired instruments with which to convey information from God, is also quite remarkable.

To consider that any of this has translated down through the years, in symbolic form, to the order of freemasons; is nothing short of astounding.

That the role of the High Priest in the early workings of Freemasonry in Ireland was effectively done away with (in place of The Excellent King as principal officer)- is a subject which needs further examination as to the why & what for.

Other details (away from the main characters) include the two “guards” positioned on the left-hand side of the composition. Somewhat reminiscent of masonic deacons.

The arch detail in the legs of the table could be something hinting at the Royal Arch connection.

Also, there is the one female character in the mural - who could be a servant of King Solomon - carrying a large fan to keep him cool perhaps...

To me, her flamboyance, full length dress, headwear and exquisite beauty suggest otherwise. An alternative narrative is that she is the Queen of Sheba, an African queen

who is said to have visited King Solomon and visited the temple. It could also be that the two guards in fact belong to her, given their proximity in the mural.

This would correlate with another “scandalous” masonic legend relating to the Queen of Sheba & Hiram Abiff, but that too forms another layer of the narrative & perhaps a chapter in another paper for another day...

Finally, when we compare the pre drawing which is currently on display in Arthur Square masonic centre, we see a few changes to the final version of the mural.

Specifically, the working tools. In the pre drawing only the square & compass are present, whereas in the final mural all three of the principle working tools appear and we are graced with a golden level.

As for the intention of John Luke, I suggest that as with his depiction of Judith & Holofernes, in looking to create something modern he has done what all the best artists do; he has sought out something truly ancient and breathed new life into it.

Nothing in the mural is by accident. John Luke did not work that way. Everything is considered & meticulously executed. He provided a depiction of what appears to be a simple scene & layered it with clues and characters with deeper meaning. The mural is full of related narratives, all of which just ask us to peel away the layers and explore the subject matter in more depth.

As for the loss in the story, the loss we started with... the provincial grand lodge building in rosemary street was sold to a private developer. It was set to become (of all things) a department store. The Luke Mural was sold with it, lost from the order of freemasons to decorate a future house of commerce.

The year is now 2021. The high street has changed beyond expectation and department stores lay vacant across the country. The former provincial masonic hall has now been vacant for 3 years and was recently placed on the buildings at risk register.

Sadly, the future of the Luke Mural looks bleak indeed.

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