

Know Thyself: Unity, Truth, Light



Theosophical symbolism in the tabernacle frame and imagery
designed and executed by Martin G. Bilger

The Temple of the People
Halcyon, California
Creeds Disappear, Hearts Remain

Know Thyself: The Theosophical Art of Martin G. Bilger

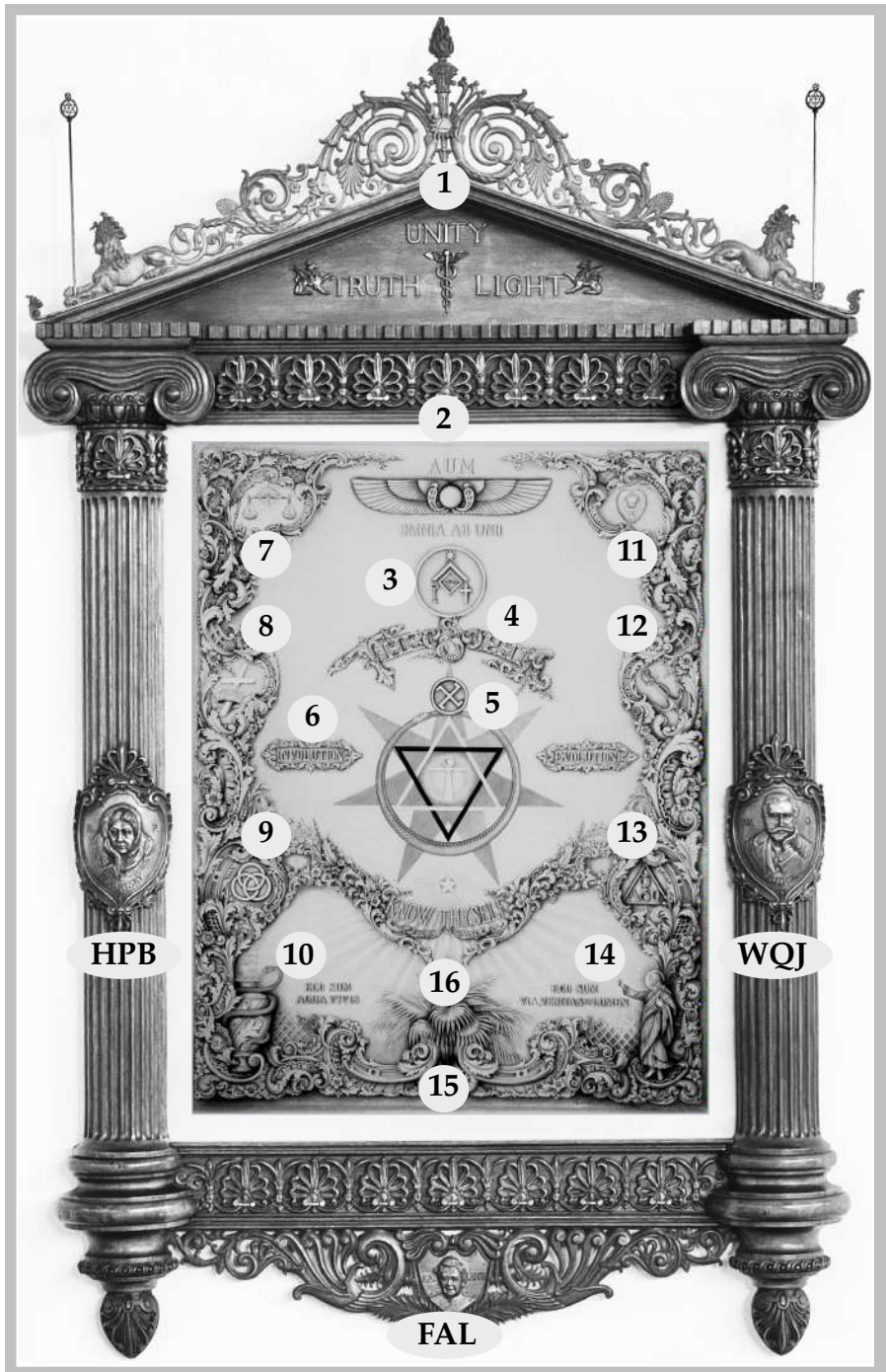
This magnificent 28x22-inch image in its elaborate frame, styled as a tabernacle, was designed, executed, and gifted to the Temple of the People by Martin G. Bilger in 1916. Following completion of the Blue Star Memorial Temple in 1924, Temple co-founder William H. Dower wrote the artist, saying "Your large picture with mahogany frame hangs majestically on the east wall." Bilger joined the Temple in 1907 and became a Temple priest in 1939. He was an artisan at the Bradley & Hubbard Art Bronze Factory in Meriden, Connecticut, where the elements of the tabernacle frame were cast and constructed.

1. The Frame and Pediment

The central image is set in an ornate mahogany frame that recalls the popular Masonic frames of its period. It features ionic columns, palmette decorations, and bronze plaques of theosophical leaders. The triangular wooden pediment includes Egyptian gryphons that hold theosophical symbols, and ornamental bronze scrollwork that culminates in a flaming torch. The words Unity, Truth, and Light flank a Caduceus of Hermes. On the left-side column is a portrait of Helena P. Blavatsky, with William Quan Judge featured on the right; both were co-founders of the Theosophical Society. A portrait of Francia A. LaDue, first Guardian in Chief of the Temple of the People, is centered at the bottom of the frame.

The imagery reveals a complex meditation on Hermetic, Alchemical, Rosicrucian, and other symbols that point to the important cycles of Life as explored in modern Theosophy. Reminiscent of an entry to a Temple, its visual scheme can be read in many ways. One key to understanding the imagery is its connection to ancient Hermeticism, whose dictum "As above, so below" points to the interaction of higher realms of spirit with the mundane material world. The imagery provides a model for the progress of the soul on its journey spiritward. A 1907 issue of the official Temple periodical *The Temple Artisan* informed its readers:

It is the mission of Hermes, as the angel of understanding, to impart to the soul the knowledge requisite for its perfectionment. Thus, by the transmission of knowledge through the unfolded intuition, the modus of divine influx, is he the Guardian of the Soul, the Mediator between the outer and the inner.



Numbers correspond to elements described in the text.

2. OMNIA AB UNO: Everything From One

Below the pediment is the word AUM, a primal and cosmic sound that Hindus believe calls into being the universe and all creation. The statement OMNIA AB UNO, "Everything from One," is directly underneath the ancient Egyptian winged sun of Ra, representing the power of eternal light. Bilger told a group of Temple members in 1934:

The teachers of the White Lodge constantly impressed upon their disciples the sincere study of the law of unity, and its strict observance in their daily lives and dealings with their fellow men ... The Rosicrucian fraternity has for its motto "Omnia ab Uno," meaning, all proceeds from the One – God, Unity, Love.

3. The Temple Seal

The official Temple Seal, created in 1900, depicts an eye flanked by a cross and a key within a gold circle, which together represent a new cycle of growth: Evolution and Involution. The coiled serpent with tail in mouth, known as the Ouroboros, symbolizes collective wisdom throughout an individual cycle, as well as the unity of all things spiritual and material in perpetual cycles of destruction and creation. In its totality, the Temple Seal symbolizes the manifestation of the evolutionary forces which the Masters use and direct for the uplifting of humankind.

4. THEOSOPHIA

Above the official Theosophical Seal is the word THEOSOPHIA, signifying "Divine Wisdom," or the hidden esoteric dimensions of the Universe.

5. Theosophical Seal

The Theosophical Seal, also depicted in miniature on the two finials atop the frame, features several symbols that represent a vast evolutionary scheme embracing the whole of nature, physical and spiritual. The seal includes the Ankh, two interlaced triangles, and the fiery cross or Swastika. The Ouroboros, once again, represents the cycles of life and death as well as the unity of all things in the eternal cycle of death and new creation. The Theosophical Society based in Adyar, India, maintains the following:

The Triangles, looked at separately, symbolize the three facets of the manifestation which is known as the Trinity in various religions and personified in Christianity as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost and in Hinduism as Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma. The darker of the two triangles, which is downward-pointing, and the lighter triangle, which is upward-pointing, symbolize respectively the descent of the life of Spirit into matter and the ascent of that life out of matter into Spirit, the perpetual opposition between the light and dark forces in nature and in man.

The Theosophical Society in Australia maintains that the Seal “speaks to an inner perception, to the intuition and to the heart, calling forth the divine in each individual who contemplates it. In its totality, it represents a synthesis of great cosmic principles operating through involutionary and evolutionary cycles, bringing us all, in the fullness of time, to the realisation of our divine nature.” The underlying seven-pointed star represents the seven alchemical planets, the seven elements, the seven days of the week, and the seven colors of the spectrum.

6. Involution and Evolution

Involution and Evolution are parts of a complex cosmic sequence. Involution is the inverse of Evolution, wherein the divine spark or Spirit descends into matter within the cosmic cycle. As matter evolves, a reverse process ensues in an ascending arc, with matter evolving and spirit involving. As H.P. Blavatsky states in *The Secret Doctrine*, “The whole of antiquity was imbued with that philosophy which teaches the involution of spirit into matter, the progressive, downward cyclic descent, or active, self-conscious evolution.... One and all, they allegorized and explained the FALL as the desire to learn and acquire knowledge — to KNOW. This is the natural sequence of human mental evolution, the spiritual becoming transmuted into the material or physical...[the] law of descent into materiality and re-ascent into spirituality.”

The symbols framing these larger central images also contribute to a sense of the movement and progress of the individual within the larger cycles of Involution and Evolution, serving to reinforce our individual connections to the spiritual source of all Being.

7. Scales of Justice and the Swastika

The Scales of Justice, centered on a swirling or fiery cross (Swastika), symbolize the tremendous positive energies of nature's creative processes, balancing the microcosm and macrocosm, as well as the "inner" spiritual and the "outer" material planes. The Swastika symbolizes the work of creation as well as the Builder or Architect, and also indicates the active human position between heaven and earth. Unfortunately, the spiritual meaning of the Swastika was stolen, corrupted, and stigmatized by the Nazi party, obscuring its true intent.

8. Cross and Crown

A 1936 issue of *The Temple Artisan* included a description of the cross: "It symbolizes essentially the foundation of all religion. The horizontal line represents matter, and the perpendicular line represents Spirit. The crucifixion, or friction which results from the play of Spirit on matter, is the essence of all soul growth. Some growth entails much pain and travail — hence the tears and blood associated with the crucifixion." According to mystic and prolific author Manly P. Hall, the cross "is a macrocosmic and microcosmic figure, setting forth the mystery of human regeneration.... Upon the cross of matter that forms our bodies, hangs the key to all the mysteries of creation. It is our duty to take this key and with it unlock the door that conceals from us the unknown. This key is the spirit. Release it." The crown suggests consecration and even triumph.

9. Three Interlocking Rings

The three interlocking rings indicate strength in unity and interconnectedness. Also known as Borromean rings, they are used as a symbol in theology, art, literature, and geometry across diverse cultures. Since the breaking of one ring destroys the linking structure, this symbol also represents the power of interdependence and an understanding of our universe. At the center of the symbol is a Reuleaux triangle, which is reflected in the shape of the Blue Star Memorial Temple walls and is thought of as the heart of the Temple work, binding together body, mind, and soul.

10. EGO SUM AQUA VIVIS and the Symbol of Asclepius

The serpent encircling a water jar is a dual symbol of rejuvenation. Just as the serpent sheds its skin and renews itself, the soul renews itself in the words EGO SUM AQUA VIVIS: "I am the living water." The symbol of Asclepius, God of the healing arts and medicine in ancient Greek religion and mythology, surrounds the auric egg as a vessel for life and spiritual transformation.

11. Heart Chalice

This combined symbol represents the heart filled with divine energies. In alchemy the sacred chalice is the receiver of materials that are fused and transmuted into the awakened, receptive inner soul. It also serves as a traditional symbol of Communion and the Holy Grail.

12. Anchor

The anchor is a traditional symbol of grounding, stability, and strength. It serves as a reminder to remain steadfast in the face of challenges, and to endure personal struggles with hope and optimism, while seeking a safe haven through spiritual self-awareness throughout the evolution of the soul.

13. Alchemical Symbol

This triangular symbol references alchemical ideas about the transformation of base materials into precious ones, and the interaction of spirit and matter in the creation of a higher unity. The major element is mercury, named for a manifestation of Hermes as the messenger in constant motion between heaven and earth. The Alpha and Omega (AO) correspond to the human spirit, reflected in the Hermetic maxim "As above, so below."

14. The Master Jesus, the Wayshower

Jesus, a Master of Wisdom and Compassion, is shown gesturing toward the words, EGO SUM VIA, VERITAS ET LUMEN: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Light." For Temple members, Jesus was the Master Exemplar and the ideal of universal love and service in and for all. *The Temple Artisan* reminded readers, "In its deep and true essence, Christianity is Theosophy as taught by Jesus, the greatest Theosophist of all."

15. Palm Fronds

Since ancient times, the palm tree has been identified with the archetypal Sacred Tree, connecting heaven and earth. The palm was carried in Egyptian funeral processions to represent eternal life. Palm fronds are used in Judaism and Christianity, and are also common to the part of California where the Temple is located.

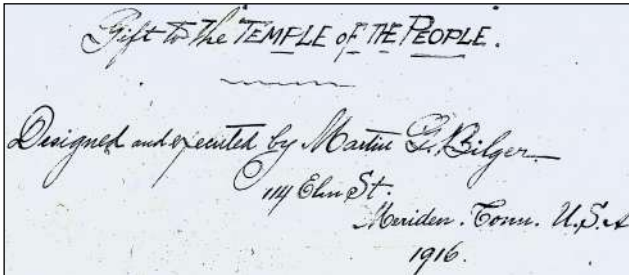
16. Know Thyself

"Know Thyself" is the great work of regeneration. Through the process of analyzing the self and bringing unconscious elements to the surface, we become more whole and integrated. As the German physician and alchemist Johann Otto von Helwig stated in the late 17th century, paraphrased here:

*He that hath knowledge of the Microcosm
cannot long be ignorant of the knowledge of the Macrocosm.*

*This is what Hermes loudly proclaimed —
that everyone should KNOW THYSELF.*

*Therefore will I follow the examples of the Egyptians,
for in THYSELF is hid the Treasure of Treasures.*



Bilger's handwritten acknowledgment accompanied the framed artwork.

With deep gratitude to Martin G. Bilger, for his masterful expression of symbolic universal wisdom, and to Temple Historian Paul Ivey and Temple Treasurer Marti Fast, for their collaborative effort to bring this illuminating pamphlet into being.

— Richard A. London, 6th Guardian in Chief, August 2026