



Crafting a bespoke apron from initial sketch, to cutting leather to a finished product.

THE DISTINGUISHED BADGE OF A MASON

Patrick Craddock, 32°

be-spoke \bi-'spōk, bē-\ *adj.* OF GOODS, ESP. CLOTHING: made to order.

The earliest speculative Masons wore uniquely designed aprons made by their wives, mothers, or sisters. There are few extant examples of these home-crafts, but they're treasured by collectors, much like an antique quilt. As Masonry grew and became organized, the manufacture of aprons moved to milliners and printers in town and eventually to factories. Bro. Patrick Craddock has taken a step back to the future and produces bespoke Masonic aprons. He is the only such craftsman we know, and he has agreed to describe the process of producing a hand-drafted apron.

A **BESPOKE APRON** usually begins with an e-mail. A brother desiring to create his own custom designed apron will contact me to discuss his ideas. Sometime the brother will have a well-defined image of what he would like, but, more times than not, he knows he has a desire for something that directly reflects himself, but doesn't exactly know what that is. We will schedule a phone conversation or a series of e-mails to discuss his desires. This allows him to get to know me, and I him, but will also allow me to learn

about the brother, his past, his present, and what makes him tick—what he is drawn to within Masonry. Sometimes the conversations are relatively short and great insight is gained as to what is most important to the brother. One design, however, took several phone conversations, over a course of months before a consensus was reached that allowed me to envision his thoughts—that ultimately led to the production of what has become the most requested copy of any apron that I've made.

During the initial communication the client and I will discuss the material he wishes to use for his apron. Most choose lambskin, but a few opt for white silk or cotton. We will also have a conversation about the shape and size of the finished apron. Some brothers are larger and some are smaller than others. We take this into consideration when drafting the pattern for each brother. There is nothing that distracts more from a well-appointed brother's appearance than an apron that is proportionately either too small or too large for his frame. We will complete the particulars of the apron with a discussion of trim color, non-functioning embellishments, and preference of securing the apron in place—tie strings or belting.

These conversations allow me to start sketching out ideas for the apron. I use a sketch book to quickly draw out my initial thought. This lets me see on paper the thoughts that have circulated through my head while conversing with the client. I will start with a small, quick drawing that is little more than a doodle. I will then use the remaining portion of the page to make a slightly larger drawing with a bit more detail. I will continue to refine the drawing until I have all the elements in place and proportionate to the final design.

The next step in the process is to select the pattern for the desired shape. An entire lambskin hide is then placed on the cutting table. Before any marks are made on the skin I will examine the entire hide to look for defects in the leather. The pattern is then placed on the hide. A second examination will insure that the pattern is in the correct location and that no deformities in the leather are present. The pattern will then

The individual pieces are then taken to the seamstress. She will cut the trim, lining, and backing pieces from the material chosen during the interview and begin the assembly procedure. This process of joining the facings and backing for each piece of the apron is laborious when done properly.

The seamstress then delivers the completed apron to my easel. Armed with the original sketch and (if needed) images of inspirational designs, I will begin the painting process. The first step is to draft the design onto the apron. Since I am usually working with a white surface, extra care must be given to not smudge the penciled lines of the design across the face of the apron. Once the design is on the apron, paint can start to be applied. I use an acrylic paint for two reasons: it is a bit more forgiving and allows

When applying the paint I usually place all the base color first and then begin to fill in the details. This is the most time consuming part of the production. Most of the brushes I use are #5 to #10 size—very small brushes with fine bristles. As each apron is unique, the complexity

Before mass production, a Mason's apron was a unique expression of his personal taste. Bro. Patrick Craddock has revived the art of bespoke aprons.

of the design will dictate the amount of time required to finish each piece. Some aprons have taken as little as eight hours while others have taken more than forty hours at the easel to complete.

When the last paint is affixed to the apron, I examine it to make sure all the details have been captured correctly and that there are no blemishes in the individual images or on the apron. I will then retreat about ten feet from the easel and take a good look at the apron from a distance to make sure everything is proportionate. This allows me to see if any of the features are too fine and need to be modified.

The final step in the production process is to sign the work. Under each bespoke apron I sign, date, and number the apron. The apron is then tempered to assure a strong bond between the paint and the leather. The only thing left to do at this point is to individually package the apron into a plastic sleeve, seal the sleeve, mark "Made in the U.S.A.," and box it for shipping.

It is my sincere hope, with each apron I make, that it will be cherished by the individual brother and that he develops a personal relationship with his badge as a Mason, and that he will wear it with "equal pleasure to himself and honor to the Fraternity." ✚

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This design has been Bro. Craddock's most popular bespoke apron, painted with acrylic on lambskin.

be traced onto the skin. This process will be repeated for apron body and bib. Once the pattern is traced I use a standard X-Acto knife and cut each piece by hand.

the apron to drape and roll across the lap with minimal wear to the artwork; and, it will allow future generations to differentiate my aprons for more historic examples.