

## French Certificate Grand Orient of France 1778

By *Yasha Beresiner*

The Library and Museum of the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy (RGLI) has recently added to its growing collection of Masonic artefacts and books a rare and important French Certificate issued by the Grand Orient of France on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1778 to **Alexandre Louis Roettiers de Montaleau**, one of the most distinguished French Masons of his time. The certificate is counter signed in manuscript by a total of 25 Freemasons of whom several are important personalities.

The Certificate, intended to be an effective passport, is 60 cms wide and 49cms high, engraved on parchment (vellum). The design depicts a balcony with seven steps surrounded by a low wall decorated with architectural and Masonic symbols. Fluted pillars flank the central design, one surmounted by two figures, holding the compasses and a five-pointed star, respectively. In the centre Truth is represented by a small figure holding up a mirror. In the background are clouds, the sun, moon and stars.

The French text of the certificate reads as follows:

*A LA GLOIRE DU GRAND ARCHITECTE DE  
L'UNIVERS.*

*SOUS LES AUSPICES ET AU NOM DE  
SERENISSIME GRAND MAITRE.*

*LE GRAND ORIENT DE FRANCE  
A TOUS LES MACONS REGULIERS;  
UNION, FORCE, SALUT.*

*Le desir que nous avons de faciliter l'Entree des Orientes  
Etrangers et des Loges regulieres de France, / a ceux de*

*nos freres qui nous paroissent dignes d'y etre admis, nous porte a constater leur etat maconique, dans la douce confiance qu'ils reparedrout dans toutes les Villes / qu'ils parcoureront l'esprit de liberte, de concorde et d'amitie fraternelle, qui fait l'essence de notre ordre ; par ces motifs, et sur le temoignage avantageux qui nous a ete rendu du frere / Alexandre Louis Boettiers de Montaleau, Ecuyer, Auditeur des Comptes, Maitre / et membre de la loge de St. Jean regulierement constituee a l'Orient de Paris, Sous le titre distinctif de L'Amitie. / Vu la decision de la Chambre de Paris du Treizieme jour du Troisieme mois de l'An de la vraie lumiere Cinq mil Sept cent soixante dix-huit. Nous / avons au dt frere Roettiers de Montaleau accorde et accordons le present Certificat Prions tous les Masons reguliers de luy faire l'accueil fraternel qu'ils desireroient eux memes / en pareille circonstance, et de l'admettre apres examen, aux travaux de son age, ainsi que nous avons coutume d'en user envers tous les freres qui se presentent en notre Orient munis / de Certificats autentiques des Orients Etrangers, ou les loges reguliers de France. En foy de quoy nous avons delivre le present Certificat de nous Signe, contre-Signe, par notre Secre / taire General, Scelle de notre grand Sceau et des trois Sceaux de nos Chambres le Vingt cinquieme jour du Troisieme mois de l'An de la vraie lumiere / Cinq mil Sept cent soixante dix huit.*

Which translates into English as follows:

*TO THE GLORY OF THE GREAT ARCHITECT OF  
THE UNIVERSE.*

*UNDER THE AUSPICES AND IN THE NAME OF THE  
MOST WORSHIPFULL GRAND MASTER,  
THE GRAND ORIENT OF FRANCE,  
TO ALL REGULAR FREEMASONS.  
UNITY. STRENGTH. GREETING.*

*Desiring to facilitate the admission into Foreign Lodges, and into the regular lodges of France, of those brethren who may appear to us worthy of being admitted, induces us to establish their masonic rank, in the hope that in every town through which they may pass, they will diffuse the spirit of liberty, concord and friendship, which is the very essence of our order ; for these reasons, and because of the favourable testimony which has been given to us of brother Alexandre Louis Roettiers de Montaleau, Esquire, Accountant General, Master Mason, and member of the Lodge of St. John, regularly constituted in the Orient of Paris, under the distinctive title of "Friendship." According to the decree of the "Chambre de Paris," dated the thirteenth day of the third month of the Year of the true light Five thousand seven hundred and seventy-eight,. We have granted and do hereby grant the present Certificate to the said brother Roettiers de Montaleau. We entreat all regular Masons to give him such a fraternal reception as they would desire for themselves under similar circumstances, and to admit him, after due examination, to the privileges of his rank, as we are accustomed to do towards those brethren who present themselves at our "Orient," duly furnished with proper Certificates from Foreign "Orients" or from the regular lodges of France. In testimony of which we have delivered the present Certificate signed by us, countersigned by our Grand Secretary, sealed with our great seal and with the three seals of our "Chambres," the Twenty-fifth day of the Third month of the Year of the true light Five thousand seven hundred and seventy-eight.*

The beneficiary named on the Certificate, **Alexandre Louis Roettiers de Montaleau**, was born in Paris in 1748. He was initiated in the Scots Mother Lodge of Marseilles in 1772 and joined the Grand Orient of France in 1778, the date of the

Certificate. In 1784 he became Grand Orator and in 1785 he was appointed the Sovereign Grand Commander of the Ancient and Accepted Rite (Rose Croix). He was President of the *Chambre des Provinces* (Provincial Board) in 1787 and President of the *Chambre de Paris* (Parisian Board) in 1788.

In 1793, when Freemasonry was nearly extinct in France following and due to the French Revolution, de Montaleau was appointed President of the *Chambre d' Administration* (Board of Management), succeeding Louis Daniel Tassin, a fellow Freemason and Paris banker, who was one of the victims of the Reign of Terror. In the same year, Montaleau was arrested and imprisoned as a "suspect" but continued to direct the affairs of the Craft from his cell (according to Rebold, the French Masonic historian). He was released on July 28<sup>th</sup> 1794 and was responsible for reviving the fortunes of the Grand Orient de France by ensuring the preservation of the archives, re-organize the body and generously paying off the Order's debts. This allowed for the resuscitation of the dormant Lodges.

In 1796, the Grand Orient was still without a Grand Master, following on the resignation of the Duke of Orleans in 1793. It was offered to de Montaleau, which he modestly declined at first and later accepted it on condition that the title was altered from Grand Master to Most Worshipful: 'Grand Venerable'. In this capacity he presided over the Grand Orient, and exercised all the prerogatives of a Grand Master. Many Lodges were resuscitated, other new ones established and Freemasonry flourished again, although, as before, subject to the divided authority of various Grand Lodges.

In 1799, de Montaleau succeeded in arranging an amalgamation between the two principal bodies of French Masons, and in 1804 Prince Joseph Buonaparte (brother of the Emperor) was elected Grand Master, with Prince Cambaceres as Substitute Grand Master, whilst de Montaleau became

Deputy and the special representative of the Grand Master (Representant particulier du Grand Maitre). He continued to hold this office till his death on January 30<sup>th</sup> 1807. de Montaleau had been directing the affairs of French freemasonry for the best part of twelve years. On his death, his son, Alexandre Henri Nicholas Roettiers de Montaleau succeeded as Deputy. Alexandre Louis Roettiers de Montaleau has been referred to as "*one of the foremost Masons of France,*" by the historian Robert F Gould.

Other signatories to the document, in addition to Louis Daniel Tassin mentioned above and who was prominent Banker of Paris, and Treasurer General of the Grand Orient in 1778 and was executed during the Reign of Terror, there are also the signatures of A Poncet, a noted French Architect who prepared the plans for the Hall of Assembly in Paris; C Daubertin, the very famous French Freemason; he was expelled from his Lodge in 1766 he continued active to become Secretary General of the Grand Orient of France in 1778 and for some years afterwards; Le Duc de Luxembourg, Deputy Grand Master to the Duc de Chartres from 1772 to 1784 and maybe, most interestingly Joseph Guillotin.

Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin was born in Saintes in 1738. He was already a prominent Mason in 1776, having been appointed on to the Committee enquiring into the High Grades of Freemasonry. In 1778 he was President of the Provincial Board (Chambre des Provinces). It was in this capacity that his signature appears on this document. He was President of the Academy of Medicine of France, when the the leaders of the Revolution applied to the Academy in 1792 for recommendation for the speedy execution of the condemned victims of the revolutionary tribunals. The Academy recommended the re-introduction of the instrument which now bears his name. They wanted to spare the poor condemned wretches from the horrors of the axe and block. The instrument, under various previous names, had existed for

a long time as a means of public execution in Germany, Italy, Scotland and England. On March 20th, 1792, the National Assembly formally adopted the recommendation and authorized the use of the instrument, which has ever since been known as the "guillotine," named after the President of the Body which recommended its adoption. Dr. Guillotin died on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1814 at the age of 76 years.

The Grand Orator, on June 24<sup>th</sup> 1814 made the following statement: "*Dr. Guillotin's last days were embittered by the thought that his name had been so prominently connected with the excesses of the Revolution ; the dreaded instrument which bore his name having been suggested by him out of pure pity for the former sufferings of condemned criminals.*" The oft told story that that Guillotin's head was one of the first to fall under his own invention, is a fable and untrue.

A rare and unique certificate now in the collection of the Library and Museum of the Regular Grand Lodge of Italy.