

Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot



Lesson 3 : The different types of tarot - purposes and intentions

When the human mind is presented with a thousand and more related things each different from the other in various ways, it cannot help wanting to classify them, and put them into different categories, hoping that this might throw some light on the subject. So now we inevitably find ourselves drawn to categorise our tarots. It would be a very complex task of almost forensic scholarly analysis to see the various influences on each tarot and draw up a kind of family tree of imagery, with so many branches and interconnections. Such an approach though interesting will be better left to some student to undertake in their Ph.D. thesis, as it would be a bit tedious, breaking the momentum of our journey in our course of exploring tarot art.

So though we will not be looking at a scholarly categorization of tarot designs, there are a number of easier and more immediately meaningful approaches we can take which will help us see different types of tarots. We can, for example, look at the intention of the designer in making the images. What was the purpose they intended in creating their individual set of designs. Now such an approach is fraught with danger as, unless we have discussed this with the artist or designer, what right do we have to say what their intentions were? (Artists in any case usually duck questions about their motivations, or at least give all sorts of obscure answers, so we might not get very far by asking them directly.) We will not get our Ph.D's with this approach of guessing or estimating the artists' intentions, but we should get some understanding and insight, flawed though this method may be.

So what are categories can we recognise based on this idea of the intention of the creator of a tarot ? A few examples immediately spring to mind.

A deck designed for cartomancy.

An art deck designed more to please the eye.

A deck presenting a system of self development.

A deck to be seen as part of a magical system.

An issue deck.

A deck designed to amuse or make some humorous point.

A promo deck, designed to promote some event, television show, etc.

A regionalising deck in which an artist seeks to locate tarot within their own country or cultural region.

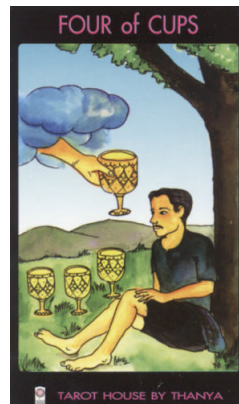
In this course we will look at many such categories, but for this lesson let us just quickly survey some of these types of tarot.

Decks designed for cartomancy.

These are almost invariably 78 card decks, as tarot readers find it difficult to work only with the major arcana but need the minors to give fullness to a reading. Thus the *Tarot of Marseilles* is a good standard deck, and many variations have been made upon this. We will look at these variations in a later lesson in the course. The *Tarot of Marseilles* and similar decks have their pip cards depicted merely as numbers, and it was the amazing creative power of the Pamela Coleman-Smith's *Rider-Waite* deck with its emblematised pip cards which have made this the primary deck for readings. Many cartomantic decks either copy the emblematic material from the pips, making their own variations of course, or step out into designing their own individual emblems for the number cards. Here are some example of number card emblems from the *Rider-Waite* and its descendants. We will just look at the Four of Cups which is a simple image of the man sitting below a tree with three cups and one being handed to him from out of the air.



Rider-Waite



Thanya



Ator



Pagan (Lo Scarabeo)



Médiéval



Arcus Arcanum



Nimue



Saki-Saki

Here we have some examples of the playful way in which the various tarot designers have taken up the emblematised pip cards and reworked them in their own style. For those who have a reasonably large collection of tarots it is an interesting exercise to lay out the same pip card from various decks and see the variations and how the artist has used the tight structure of the *Rider-Waite* deck as a vehicle for their own creative explorations. This is the power of the tarot - it gives structure and freedom to the imagination at the same time. There are other cartomancy decks which create their own unique emblems for each of the pip cards and we will look at these in a later lesson.

Art decks.

As tarot emerged into mid 20th century culture, various artists became inspired to create artworks based on tarot. Often they chose only to illustrate the 22 major arcana, which to an artist was the exciting dramatic aspect of a tarot deck. We have already seen examples of such art decks in lesson two in the works of Renato Guttuso and Shandra MacNeill. There are some amazing tarots that fall into this group. A powerful and dramatic example is Alain Bocher's *Tarot de la Réa* of 1982. Salvador Dalí created a collage tarot in 1984 which has become quite well known and he incorporates various elements from his paintings, flowing clocks, his wife Gala as the Empress. Niki de Saint Phalle a sculptor and painter even created an amazing sculptural Tarot Garden in Tuscany, with Gaudiesque structures. She also produced a set of art tarot in 2000. On the right we see the art tarot of the Italian artist Franco Gentilini, whose tarot designs of 1975 pay homage to a number of 20th century, primarily surrealist, artists. Here in his Luna we are decidedly in a Giorgio de Chirico landscape.



These art tarots were made by established artists but there are many tarot made by lesser known and amateur artists with the same impulse, that of using the tarot structure as a vehicle for an art work. We will be exploring this in later lessons in the course as this is an important group of tarots.

Decks presenting systems of self development.

In the 1970's when people became especially concerned with their inner development, certain writers realised that they could overlay their ideas onto, or fold them into, tarot imagery. Rather than using cards to tell our future, we were now being asked to use tarot imagery as a way of changing our nature and destiny. Thus evolved a whole new species of tarot. One of the forerunners of this style was Marty Yeager's *Tarot of Meditation* (1975) which invited the owner of the deck to use the images as sources for meditation. In the booklet that accompanies the cards Yeager shows his leanings both to Eastern philosophy and the writings of Jung. A later example of this psychological type of tarot is George Hess' *Analytical tarot* whose images were painted by Rose Szalewski. This dates from the late 1990s. The *Dance of Life* tarot by Audrey Savage and Pamela Scott Frantz provides a substantial book showing how these cards can be used as the basis for some self-developmental process involving the usual meditations etc. The *Universal tarot* of Maxwell Miller was issued by the Findhorn Press in 1996 and this brings together within the tarot structure symbols from all varieties of traditions and culture in an attempt to provide a kind of universal guidebook in symbols for our inner development. There are a growing number of this type of tarot which is not necessarily intended to be used for readings but for the psychological or spiritual development of the individual.



Yeager



Analytical



Dance of Life



Universal

Designers of this class of tarot often felt the need to change the names of the trumps in order to give them some more accessible handles or hooks linking with the theme of inner development.

Deck to be seen as part of a magical system.

Modern tarot emerged in the 19th century out of magical and occult orders, through such people as Paul Christian, Eliphas Levi, Oswald Wirth, Papus, Mathers, Wescott and the Golden Dawn through to Waite. So it is not surprising that many modern decks continue this tradition and rework it. One of the most important of such magical (or perhaps we had better spell that 'Magickal') tarot was the *Thoth* deck designed by Aleister Crowley

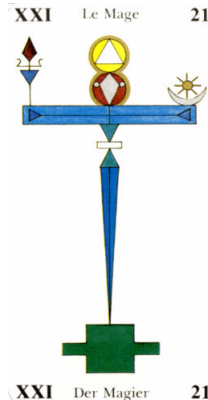
and painted by Lady Frieda Harris which they worked on during the war years and published in 1944 as a small limited edition within small circle of associates. It was later, in the 1960's, made more widely available through being issued by major card publishers and its flowing expressive artwork had a profound influence on modern tarot art. There are relatively small numbers of such magical decks and we will devote a couple of lessons to these later in the course. One of the key magical sources for tarot was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn which spanned the 1890's and the first few years of the 20th century. As part of their magical instruction the adepts in this small Order had to make their tarot cards following the information in the restricted papers of the Order. These decks were not published and did not make a direct impact on tarot artists. In recent years much of this material has been published, so much so that in 2004 Richard Dudschus and David Sledzinki issued a *Classic Golden Dawn Tarot* deck in line drawings. One of the most weird of modern tarot decks is the *Le Tarot Magique* designed by Frederic Lionel and published in 1980. We are here far removed from the flowing interweaving of symbol, form and colour that is seen in the Crowley deck, and instead we are presented with what appear more like magical sigils used in ritual magic. With the more recent (2001) *Golden Dawn Magical Tarot* of Sandra Tabatha Cicero we return to more conventional tarot images, powerfully and boldly coloured.



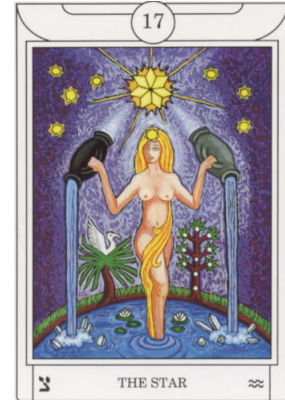
Thoth - Crowley



Classic Golden Dawn



Magic - Lionel



Golden Dawn-Cicero

Decks based on addressing or presenting issues

People seem to love rhetoric, to have some point made in an engaging way. Thus it is not surprising that various creative people began to see tarot as but another medium for distributing or packaging a message. Thus arose decks with an agenda. We can perhaps place some of the feminist decks in this category. Of course it is not just gender and sexuality that was promoted as an issue by tarot cards designs. In 1981 Dirk Dykstra created the *Ravenswood Eastern Tarot* which attempts to present the European tarot images within a middle eastern context in a strange melange of eastern styles. The pip cards use the Rider-Waite emblematic structure. Raymond Buckland attempts much the same thing in 2001 with his *Romani Tarot*, presenting tarot as an emanation of gypsy or

Romany culture, even giving the cards Romany titles. The paintings are rather pleasant with good characterisation but they present a wholly romanticed world, in which one finds it difficult to believe. In the five of staves we even have a group of men doing Morris dancing. This is clearly a work of rhetoric, but since it went out of print the deck is much sought after. There are also a number of political issue decks such as the *Anti-G7* deck of 1994 or the *Anti-Nuclear Wendländisches Tarot* of 1980.



4. THE EMPEROR

Thea's Tarot



Brotherhood



Ravenswood Eastern



Romani

Decks designed to amuse.

Not all tarot designers are deeply serious and immersed in mythology, Jungian psychology, or the intense mysteries of esoteric studies. Some just like to poke fun at their audience. The *Ator Tarot* above is an example of subtle humour carried in the style of the artwork, but others are perhaps more up front. Many of these adopt the medium of cartoons. A fine example from 1999 is Graham Cameron's *Phantasmagoric Theater Tarot* with its delightful and direct humorous images. In 1977 *F'Murr* created a series of humorous tarot images for the French magazine *Pilote*, which was later published in book form in 1984. These reduce tarot images to absurdity. The Chariot, which is entitled 'Vroum' is being pulled by two Mickey Mouse figures, while the driver of the coach has his cap drawn over his eyes and puffs on a cigarette. Peter Wood makes the small square tarot cards of his *Goblin Tarot* by hand to order. The goblins are beautifully drawn and great fun. A photographic tarot was issued in Britain 2004 which literally 'takes the piss' out of tarot pretensions. This is the *Alcohol Tarot* with its suits of wines, spirits, lagers and beers. The humour is rather juvenile perhaps but it hits its target. Strangely this became quite sought after, though it seems to have annoyed a few people in the tarot community because of its irreverent theme of alcohol and drunkenness.



Phastasmagoric



F'Murr



Goblin



Alcohol

Promotional Decks

As tarot became more popular during the 1970's and 1980's some organisations realised that they could hitchhike on this developing art form and use it to promote themselves, or some film, television show or pop music. We have already seen an example of this in lesson two, the *Tattoo tarot*, which was probably given away by a tattooist to promote their work. Some tarot were given away in magazines. An example of this is some small cards based on the *Tarot of Marseilles*, given away in the Spanish Rock and pop music magazine *Super Pop*. They seem to have issued a number of such tarots. In the May 1979 issue of the Italian fashion magazine *Annabella*, the Lancôme cosmetics company created a rather fine majors only tarot designed by Giancarlo Carloni to promote its Magie Noire ('Black magic') perfume. The artwork is of a stylish art deco nature, depicting rather sophisticated people, no doubt reflecting the image they wanted to associate with their product. In 2003-2004 HBO produced a television series called *Carnivàle*, which was a very dark and almost surreal melodrama incorporating tarot images in its opening credits and a fortune teller as one of its main characters. In 2004 they decided to issue a tarot deck as a promotional item. This has no relationship to the tarot imagery used in the TV show and are simple oval mask like faces. In the major arcana the eye on the right bears a symbol associated with the tarot trump, while with the minors the eye on the left holds a symbol for the suit. Here we see the Wheel of Fortune card with the appropriate symbol in the eye on the right. The creators of this tarot had probably not even seen the television show as they base their designs on carnival mask forms, whereas the show is about a traveling circus.

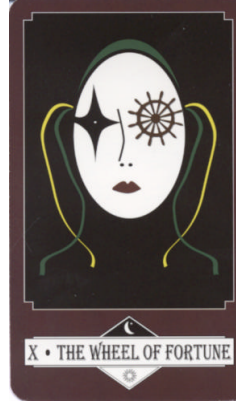
In Taiwan and China which has seen an explosion of tarot production in the past few years, tarot are often given away as promotional items. Some of these are trivial and of indifferent quality, but the Chinese National Geographic Magazine recently gave away, as a gift, the *Cosway Tarot*. This is a tightly composed 22 card photographic tarot in which various actors pose in tableau based on the tarot trumps.



Super Pop



Annabella



Carnivale



Chinese National Geographic

Regionalising decks

Some creators of tarot decks decide to structure their tarot designs around imagery from their own region or country. Thus in a sense they try to locate a tarot within their own culture, perhaps thinking that this might make tarot more accessible to their fellow countrymen (or even a group within a small region of a country), or on the other hand wishing to draw the wider tarot community's attention to the delights of the culture of a particular place.



The *Siamese Tarot* by P. Sukij presents the conventional *Rider-Waite* designs but expressed in a Siamese style. He reflects a Thai Buddhist imagery in these delightful images. Osvaldo Menegazzi, the creator of a number of striking tarot designs, in his *Sardinia Tarot* of 1984, depicts images of various artefacts, bronze sculptures and pottery vases from Sardinia on his major arcana. The minor arcana pips reflect the different regions of Sardinia, while the court cards show people in the particular peasant dress of these regions. Amerigo Folchi, another prolific designer of tarot decks, created his *I Tarocchi nei colori della Toscana* (the tarot in the colours of Tuscany) in 1992. This 22 card deck takes the main image from the *Tarot of Marseilles* and places these beside an

important building in Tuscany. Thus the Emperor is shown beside the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, the Hierophant with the Cathedral in Siena. The already heightened colours of the images in this deck are further stressed by the inclusion in each design of a Swatch style watch. I am not sure if Swatch actually sponsored this deck, whether they had a manufacturing plant in Tuscany, or whether this was just a playful conceit of the artist. Our final example here is the *Aztec tarot* from 1986 designed and painted by Jane Denant and Gerard Martin, using imagery from Aztec manuscripts. This non-standard tarot attempts to locate tarot within the creators' conception of Aztec mythology and culture and arises perhaps more from imaginative invention rather than an in-depth study of Aztec ideas.

So we have categorised tarot decks according to what we perceive as the intention of the creator of the tarot. Here we have just taken eight such ways of looking at tarot decks from a perspective of the motivation of the creators. If you have the enthusiasm, as an exercise do try and list other intention categories you might see expressed in the decks you have in your own collection, or can see as images on the internet.