

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

Lesson 2 : The guises of the tarot Fool



Even people who have no interest in the tarot will probably have some image in their minds of the tarot Fool, which has been appeared in so many contexts, in novels, films, music and other aspects of our contemporary culture, that he is difficult to escape.



Our brave little fool wanders across a landscape seemingly rapt in a daydream oblivious of the cliff he is about to fall over. The image in the Rider-Waite of 1910 is perhaps the best known. His garment here is embroidered with foliage and flowers, he has a feather in his cap and holds a flower in his left hand. His dog seems to bark at his heels. Is he warning his master or just going along for the fall himself?

On the right is a version of the Rider-Waite redrawn and painted in watercolour by Roberto de Angelis and published in the early 1990's as



I Tarocchi della Zingara (tarot of the gypsies) as a majors only deck which was later in 2000 expanded to a full 78 card deck and issued as the *Universal Tarot*. Roberto de Angelis' paintings are delightfully modelled and sensitively coloured compared with the Pamela Coleman-Smith designs of 80 years before. She was not able to take advantage of modern colour printing techniques and had to settle for the imperfection of a kind of stencilled colour which could hold no subtle shading. In his redrawing of the Rider-Waite images de Angelis remains mostly true to the original and only adds a few major changes to the depictions.

Another influential tarot deck is that of Oswald Wirth. Wirth, was a student of the occultists Stanislas de Guaita and Eliphas Levi, and he based his tarot on the earlier *Tarot of Marseilles*. This was created in France in 1889 for his book *Le Tarot des Imagiers du Moyen-Age*. We see this on the left. A rather fine edition of this rare book was issued by the French publisher Tchou in 1978 which had the images reproduced in the text as line drawings and coloured card in a pocket at the back of the book. (This is not that expensive and can still be easily found on the second-hand market). Wirth's tarot was redrawn and reissued in 1926 (the third image).



It was published again in 1966 and in many editions since then. It is a majors only deck. Just as Roberto de Angelis reworked the Rider-Waite, ‘Sergio’ had redrawn the Wirth cards and this was published as the *Tarocchi Ermetici* in 1989 (the fourth in our line of illustrations). In the Tchou edition, which follows the original, the Fool is placed at the end as trump 22. A great deal of angst and heated discussion has been made over the years by various esoteric people as to whether the Fool is card 0 or card 22, whether it is the first or the last in the trumps, and some even take the position that being card 0 it is somehow special and transcends such ordering. Such matters are not important to our study course as we are really only concerned with the images themselves. In the Wirth type decks, which follow the Tarot of Marseilles, the Fool’s dog bites him on the leg rather than merely accompanying him on his way. Also our Fool, rather than being about to step over a precipice is walking blindly towards a crocodile.

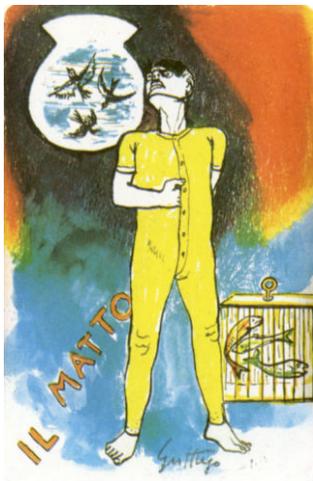
The Fool can be delightfully elaborated while still holding to these simple original forms. Thus although Paul Stuck’s designs for the tarot published by Ansata in 1981 as the *Mertz-Stuck Tarot* is full of new ideas and replete with Egyptian symbolism, his Fool remains conventional though beautifully depicted. Here he strides across a landscape his dog biting at his leg with its torn trousers. His eyes are turned to the sky above but there is no danger for him ahead. This image follows more the *Tarot of Marseilles* symbolism by not including the precipice or the jaws of a waiting crocodile.



In the *Napo Tarot* published in 1998 we are still with a recognisable image of the Fool. This was created by an Argentinean artist using bright stylized human figures. Here the Fool has his head in the form of a spiral from the centre of which his nose pokes out. The author says that his head is a whirlwind of ideas so much that he has his back to the sun and so cannot see where he is going. In his stylized poncho he wanders oblivious to danger towards a precipice in which a crocodile or

alligator awaits, thus, unlike Paul Stuck's vision, Napo decides on a double jeopardy. The Fool, being foolish, is wearing spurs on his sandals. He is not accompanied by a dog. At the top right is the astrological symbol for Uranus. Napo or the designer of the deck, Betty Lopez, associates each of the tarot trumps with a zodiacal or planetary sign.

The tarot of Silvia Maddonni published in France in 1981 appears to have been created in 1978. Her images are drawn in a fine pen then coloured. Her Fool is shown without the usual accoutrements. No dangerous precipice, no crocodile, no dog, but instead he is burdened by being tied to four objects - a fish, a caged bird, a cauldron or pot and a card labelled *Le fou* 'The fool', and bearing the image of a serpent seizing its own tail. Here we are being asked to shift our conception of the Fool. Maddonni wants to present us with the image of a Fool being someone burdened by being tied or attached to enigmatic, almost surreal objects. All the figures in her tarot seem self-absorbed and immersed in some existential anxiety. The images are beautiful but bear a certain unsettling quality. In this relatively early modern period deck we see a reassessment of the nature of the Fool.



Renato Guttuso (1911-1987) was a well known Sicilian painter who worked much of his life in Rome, though he had to flee from there during the rise of Mussolini as he was an anti-fascist and a member of the underground resistance. Later he established a reputation as Italy's foremost social realist painter of the twentieth century. In 1883 he was commissioned to produce a tarot deck. The Fool of this deck is shown in pyjamas or a buttoning-up undergarment. On the right is a bird cage with fish in it, while in the opposite corner is a fishbowl with birds. The birdcage and basin relates perhaps to the Maddonni tarot image, and here the fool is defined by his inability to find the appropriate containers for his pets. Guttuso's Fool, who bears a passing resemblance to Hitler, stares upwards in a wild, manic, almost mad way. His tarot is both erotic and has aspects of humorous social comment which is typical of much of his output.

The *Jungian Tarot* created in 1984-1988 by Robert Wang presents us with a different image of the Fool. Here he seems almost self assured, holding a flaming red Rose in his right hand and gazing outwards. At his feet on the right is a famous symbol found on some Gnostic amulets of the serpent Ophis encircling the world egg. On the left is a mandala - each of the twenty two major arcana in this tarot have a different mandala - this one is in the form of twelve spokes. In the foreground, like in some early Flemish paintings, is a row of leaves and flowers. The Fool in this Jungian context is a positive assured archetype, and is neither a voyager on a dangerous journey, nor a deluded soul, nor a figure of fun.



We can now see how the depiction of the Fool can strongly determine the nature, the style and message of the particular tarot. Some tarot creators have said that this is their most difficult card to design as it is like the opening window onto the deck, and its outer face. Many people remember decks primarily through their Fool card.

A beautifully painted French deck, *Le Tarot d'Or* by Joëlle Balle published in 1998 shows the Fool as a secure character proceeding on his journey across the checkerboard pavings of a chessboard complete with some black pieces. This Fool card is actually entitled *la quête alchimique* ('the alchemical quest'). He seems to be moving towards a white queen who appears like a lighthouse emitting a beam across the sea. Our Fool appears confident enough, even though his walking stick is bent in places and the suitcase he holds in his hand is open and in danger of spilling out its contents. In a brilliant piece of self reference Joëlle Balle shows us in the suitcase a copy of the tarot d'Or (naturally with a golden cover). This tarot is delightful and worth collecting. It is a majors only tarot though Balle is working on designs for the minor arcana.



In this interesting Russian *Tarot of Fortune* the artist Klim Li shows the Fool as a kind of clown, wearing a jester's cap and bells, doing acrobatics, balancing on one hand, upside down on a rock. A yellowish moon is seen beside him and his dog wanders about on the ground below. This is one of the more creative of the Russian tarots. The artwork is in pen with some colour wash and coloured pencil. This is a 78 card deck, published in 2001, and all of the pip cards carry elaborate illustrations.



The Japanese *Gundam Wing* children's anime or cartoon series depicts a future world in which humans, wearing elaborate fighting suits called 'Gundams', fight against an oppressive regime. A number of tarots have been marketed based on this series, most of which seem just to be vehicles for presenting the characters in the series. One of these decks illustrated by Ugeppa holds close to the traditional tarot images with artwork of a finely crafted style. The Fool is here shown as a clown with baggy pants walking the tightrope in a circus tent.



A tarot called the *Tattoo Tarot* shows the Fool as a circus juggler. He juggles what must be plastic containers of pigments used by tattooists. I have been unable to find out anything at all about this particular tarot, which are small cards and were probably issued as a promotional item by some tattoo parlour. They are distinguished by their strong almost luminous colours, and the device of depicting the faces of the characters in the stylized form of a cross.



Ciro Marchetti's *Gilded Tarot* of 2004 shows us the Fool as a jester with his triple peaked cap of bells juggling the signs of the zodiac, the icons of human fate. He spins, simultaneously, a hoop with his left leg and below we see his jester's wand. In 2005 Marchetti issued his *Tarot of Dreams* with the same highly skilled technically perfect artwork which is a delight to the eye. Again he chooses to depict the Fool as a species of medieval jester. The detail of the imagery makes these cards worth visiting again and again. Here our Fool is not juggling but balances on a large ball (accompanied by a kitten who reaches out to attempt to catch a butterfly).



He holds the globe of the earth in his right hand and a hoop in his left. A delightful little detail is that he wears a strip of three medals, one with a sun, another with the moon and the third with a star. As if the tarot cards were not enough *Tarot of Dreams* includes a CD-Rom with animated versions of the cards, a new departure for tarot.

We have seen how the Fool can become pictured as the clown or the jester. Tarot artists have extended the image of the Fool beyond the buffoon or victim of circumstances to a figure totally in control of himself, almost rivalling the strong figure of the next card in the series, the Magician. But we are not yet finished with our visits to the tarot fools. There are still some

surprises awaiting us in the packs of yet unopened tarots.

Lunaea Weatherstone issued a limited edition tarot deck in 2005 called the *Full Moon Dreams*. This is a photo collage deck and as we will see in a later lesson, collage decks can be rather variable in quality of production. Here, however, we have a high quality collage deck in which the interesting images have obviously been very carefully chosen and brought together in the 78 cards - even the pips are full collage. Lunaea present the Fool through the picture of an innocent child walking on a rainbow. This image totally captures the idea of the Fool and yet is quite an original conception. The doll like child possibly taken from childrens' 'scraps' (brightly printed images which children cut out and paste into scrapbooks) is accompanied by a walking cat and an owl. A little cherub appears in the top right corner and a maternal figure looks on at the antics of the child.



From a picture of innocence we move to a different world through the *Skins Deck* of the prolific Canadian tarot artist Shandra MacNeill. This is a strongly erotic deck in earth tones of chalk on a dark textured paper. She chooses to depict her Fool as a young woman standing before a four poster bed. It seems she is not necessarily thinking of that bed as a place of sleep. The cards, which are irregularly cut perhaps to give them a less manufactured and more immediate feel, depict this woman's sexuality through the various arcana. The sexual scenes though sometimes explicit are in no way prurient, and seem to be documenting a woman's journey exploring the aspects and boundaries of her sexuality. Shandra MacNeill's art is challenging but very creative, and her tarots are a wonderful example of how an artist today can use this ancient structure to express their vision without restriction. In the *Skins Deck* our Fool is a young woman bravely setting out to explore her emergent adult sexuality, no victim, clown, or lost soul. We will return to Shandra MacNeill's art later in this course.



The *Tarot of the Old Path* was designed Sylvia Gainsford and published in 1990 as a 78 card deck. A printing of the majors of much lesser quality was issued by the Italian magazine *Astrella* as *I Tarocchi dell'amore*. The Fool card shows the fool with his bundle on a stick over his shoulder making his way along a path that leads up a high distant mountain. He has left behind a scene of chaos and danger as the child is about to enter an open fire. A woman rushes to the rescue. Here we have the Fool as one so self-absorbed in his own personal quest that he is thoughtless about others. When we look further up the path we see that it branches three and more ways, so even his goal is uncertain. In the booklet that comes with this deck one of the keywords for this card is "foolhardiness", yet another aspect of the Fool.

The 1978 *Tarot of Frown Strong* is composed of richly symbolic coloured images. It is a great delight to the eye. The Fool card stands out from the rest by its stark almost monotone image. A figure with the word 'Fool' written across his forehead raises his hand to push us away. He does not even meet our gaze but turns his eyes away from us. The author and artist Leo, sees the Fool as a card of negation. He says "[This card] speaks for itself in that it negates a place or card in the actual reading. The only way a person can negate themselves at a high level is by suffering loss of face. The words that go with this card are unclean, fool." This is certainly a negative view of our Fool.



Negation



Ingerid Blakstad in her amazing tarot designs in the medium of embroidery which were printed as a full 78 card tarot in 1998, takes a startling approach. The Fool card just bears the words "The missing Fool". On the left I show the Magician card from her tarot so we can appreciate something of her style of embroidered image.

Is it the ultimate and most outward journey of the Fool as a tarot image, not to be depicted in the deck? Has the zero card here been taken to its outermost limit? We will see what future tarot artists can further devise.



This lesson has been designed to serve two main purposes. Firstly, to explore the nature of the Fool as he is imaged in the different tarot decks. The conventional image of the foolish person at the mercy of circumstances and almost oblivious of dangers awaiting him, has been expanded to give a more positive image of the Fool being one who is open to new experiences, then further we saw how the fool can be viewed as clown, juggler and medieval jester, and then an innocent, and a soul exploring themselves. Finally we were asked to picture the Fool as negation and emptiness. We have only been able to explore a few facets of the Fool in this lesson, and we should be aware that in the thousand and more tarot designs that exist there are many more treasures and beautiful imaginings of this figure.

The second purpose of this lesson was to introduce you to the multiplicity and variety of tarot imagery. Not all lessons will adopt this approach. It would be perhaps too indulgent of me in designing this course to merely trawl people in each lesson through each of the arcana in turn comparing the different ways of depicting the essence of each card. Though informative and instructive, I suspect this would not make a satisfying course. However, it would be a good exercise for you to undertake with whatever tarot decks you own. If you have the time and a reasonable collection of decks (say 20 or more) do try and work through the different arcana as they are found in the different decks you have available, in the same way as we have explored the tarot Fool.