

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



Lesson 8 : Cat themed decks

I feel sure most tarot people also have a cat. So it will come as almost no surprise at all that a number of cat tarots have emerged to unite both these interests. My own collection currently has fourteen cat themed tarots, and there are a few others still to collect.

- 1985 Les Chats d'Evelyne Nicod
- 1985 Tarot of the Cat People
- 1990 Gatti Originali Tarot - Menegazzi
- 1990 22 Arcani 'i Gatti Buffi - Menegazzi
- 1990 Japan Cat Tarot
- 1993 Tarot du Chat - Sedillot
- 1996 Tarot Cards for Cats - Regen Dennis and Kipling West
- 1997 Taiwan - Cat's Tarot
- 1997 Japanese - Cat's World Tarot
- 2000 Cat's House Tarot (a.k.a. Neko's House Tarot)
- 2004 Baroque Bohemian Cats' Tarot - Karen Mahony
- 2004 Medieval Cat Tarot Deck - Gina Pace
- 2004 Chat du Marseille
- 2004 Taro Gatti
- 2005 Tarot of White Cats
- 2005 Japanese - Manga Furoku Wachifield Dayan Tarot

Let us first look at the earliest cat tarot which seems to have appeared in 1985. To say that Evelyne Nicod is totally obsessed with cats is no overstatement. This French artist now living in Italy has produced a great number of etchings and coloured prints mostly on cat themes. Her designs for her major arcana tarot were published by the Italian card publisher Meneghello in a limited



edition of 1500, which must have been quite popular as it was later reissued in a further edition of 1000. Her cats often seem to engage the viewer with an almost defiant gaze. There are a number of web sites devoted to her work, details will be found in the lesson notes.

Five years later in 1990 Osvaldo Menegazzi produced two cat tarots, the 22 *Arcani* “*I Gatti*” or original cat tarot and the *I Gatti Buffi* the humorous cat tarot. These majors only decks are in a style very similar to Evelyne Nicod, fine line drawings enclosed in an ornate border. In his original tarot the cats are depicted in a naturalistic way, though often placed in the unusual pose of a tarot image. His humorous cat tarot, on the other hand, takes this a stage further, as the cats are given human facial expressions and gestures indicating their inner feelings. It is interesting to compare these two ways of workings with the cat theme. These decks are inexpensive and it is well worth purchasing these and, as an exercise, making a comparison for yourself.



I resist the temptation to show the same cards from each deck side by side and leave this interesting exercise for you to do. If you like to see cats as they are, then you will love the *Gatti originale*, but if you like to see cats as you would like them to be, perhaps the

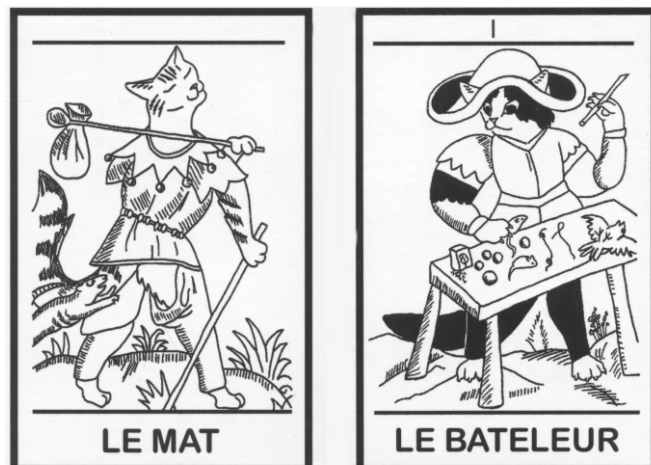
Gatti Buffi will amuse and delight you.

Carole Sédillot, a French writer, who has produced books on various esoteric themes, including alchemy, Jungian psychology as well as tarot, created her *Le Tarot du Chat* in 1993. The artwork was created by Claude Trapet and is based on the familiar Tarot of Marseilles structure and is a full deck of 78 cards. We can expect that Carole Sédillot had some input into the designs. She sees the cat as a mysterious animal acting as a messenger between us and the mysteries of the tarot. As both of these are a mystery to us humans, it was a happy fusion for her to create a tarot of cats.



The tarot designs are so closely derived from the tarot of Marseilles, that it will be a useful exercise of those who have a copy of this deck, to place the cards side by side and see how the artist, Claude Trapet, has worked with these archetypes. She uses the medium of coloured drawings. Her cats have engaging eyes but without going so far as the more expressive aspects of Menegazzi's *Humorous Cats*. The pips of the suits are not emblematic but they do show a cat relating on some way to the pip symbols. For each suit we see a different variety of cat, a longhair, a Siamese, and a tabby. The humour here is subtle and often hidden in the detail. The Moon card shows two dogs howling at the moon within which is a contented and perhaps rather smug cat.

In 2004 an American, Elaine Moertl produced a *Chat du Marseille* majors only deck. Her simple pen drawings are based on the 1761 Conver edition but with cats replacing the human figures. One can see the way that both Moertl and Trapet have worked closely within the structure of the classic Tarot of Marseilles. Elaine Moertl suggests that one colours her images.



In 1996 Regen Dennis and Kipling West, having no doubt noted the appearance of the cat tarots, came up with a different approach. Here they produced not a 'cat tarot' but a 'tarot for cats'. Dennis created a book to go with the deck to help cats read the tarot. It is very funny and well worth reading, particularly the introduction which gives a cat-centred history of tarot. The illustrations for this majors only deck are by Kipling West who has also produced the *Halloween Tarot* (1996) and the *Amazing Fortune-Telling Book* tarot (1997). The paintings are not so contrasty and cartoon based as are those in the *Halloween*, and she here creates softer textured backgrounds against which her main images are shown. The main ingredient of most cat tarots seems to be the use of subtle humour and this certainly holds for this beautifully conceived deck, whose images are reworked from a cat-centric viewpoint.



There is the rather fine image of the kitten snuggling around the dog's muzzle, and the cat-centred image of the chair as Tower.

Since the idea of the cat tarot had become well established it is not surprising that a number of far eastern tarot designers turned to explore this form. There was an early 1990 example from Japan, but in the later 1990's we have the *Cat's Tarot* from Taiwan (1997) a *Cat's World Tarot* (1997) from Japan, and the *Cat's House Tarot* (2000) also Japanese, and in 2005 we see the *Wachifield Dayan Tarot* based on a Japanese Manga character.



The *Cat's Tarot* by Terry Tsai, published in Taiwan in 1997, is aimed at a younger audience. The cards are brightly coloured with chunky, boldly modelled cats, all with large appealing eyes and engaging smiles. Even the poor cats falling from the Tower are smiling! Each of the figures on the 22 cards are framed between a rod on the left with the Moon at the top, and one on the right with the Sun, around



which is woven a roll of parchment. On many of the cards the cats play happily with mice or with bells. Surprisingly for a child-focussed deck the creator included conventional Death and Devil cards. The artwork, though cute, is nicely modelled and has a uniform style throughout the cards.

A later Japanese tarot from 2005 is based on a manga character, a cat called Dayan, who lives in the imaginary world of Wachifield, created by author and illustrator Akiko Ikeda. There are apparently nearly forty books featuring Wachifield and its inhabitants, so the time was ripe for a Wachifield tarot. I leave it up to the reader, if they have the enthusiasm, to research the different characters that appear on the tarot. I can report that one of them is a female hare called Marcy, who is depicted in an amazingly cat like form. Here we see



the mysterious Dayan as the Magician, and then he with his friend Marcy on the Lovers card. This is a majors only deck and could well be seen as a promo deck, promoting the Wachifield books.

In 2004 and 2005 we saw the appearance of three major cat tarots the *Baroque Bohemian Cats' Tarot*, the *Medieval Cat Tarot* and the *Tarot of White Cats*, all full decks with the major and minor cards. These three have sumptuous, highly polished artwork, but now our cats are seen dressed as humans. We are far away from the depictions of Osvold Menegazzi or Kipling West, and instead in a world where cats have become little people. The *Tarot of the White Cats* adheres very closely to the Rider Waite deck especially in the minor arcana. They are almost without exception, painted wearing elaborate costumes, skirts, robes, tunics, jackets and trousers and their paws are depicted very much like human hands being able to grasp and manipulate items. The artwork by Severino Baraldi is highly finished and detailed in the best Lo Scarabeo style. One has the distinct impression, however, that there is little of the essence of cat in this deck, and if the artist were to replace the cats heads with human ones we would find that entirely acceptable. The *Medieval Cat Tarot* takes a different approach and presents us with a deck in the style of a 15th century deck such as the *Visconti Sforza*, though not copying this directly. The majors and the court cards all have dark brown backgrounds set within ornate borders, against which our medieval cats dressed in colourful garments pose in the familiar tarot tableau. The artwork by Laurence Teng, reflects early Italian, and to a lesser extent Flemish, paintings and manuscript illustrations, but in a more chunky and modelled style. The cats faces seem devoid of fur and have a pink almost human skin tone. There is no attempt now at remodelling paws (as in the *Tarot of the White Cats*) and our medieval cats now have full human hands with opposable thumbs. The pip cards are not emblematic as such, but have a small circular oval set amongst the stylised pips, in

which a scene is depicted which in many cases is drawn from the Rider-Waite minors. The Aces are a delight, the three mice on the Ace of Pentacles being especially fine. There is a grace and elegance to the artwork and it has obviously been well considered and worked into a stylistic whole. The *Baroque Bohemian Cats' Tarot* takes an entirely different approach again, not using painted depictions. Instead it uses photo-collage to present us with cats appearing dressed in elaborate costumes and posed against the architecture of Prague and other places in the Czech Republic to act out the tarot emblems. The pip cards are emblematic and entirely drawn from the familiar Rider-Waite imagery. A great deal of work, by Karen Mahony and Alex Ukolov, must have gone into creating this deck in melding so well the cats' heads, paws and tails with the costumed dolls and then inserting this into the architectural backgrounds. It would probably have been easier to draw or paint the images, but in a strange way the use of actual photographs of real cats, makes the images more striking and gives them a sharper impact, compared to that, say, of the *Tarot of the White Cats*. Instead of a remote connection to cats, as viewers we are here drawn more into the tarot space occupied by these animals. One sees them simultaneously as real cats and as tarot tableau, and this works very successfully. This deck has much subtle humour within it.

It is an interesting exercise, if you have these three decks, to lay them out side by side and compare the ways in which the artists have tried to achieve their goal. These are readily available inexpensive decks, and are essential for anyone interested in Cat tarots.

In 1985 there appeared a strange science fiction or fantasy tarot by another 'Cat Lady', Karen Kuykendall, the *Tarot of the Cat People*. This lavishly illustrated deck was produced together with an extensive text describing the strange regions of the Outer World in which she set her imagery. The people of the major arcana were Sky people of the Diamond Kingdom, those in the suit of Swords were Fire people of the Ruby kingdom, those of Wands were Sand people of the Emerald kingdom, while the Cups depicted the Salt people of the Topaz kingdom, and finally the suit of Pentacles has the Rock people of the Sapphire kingdom. This imaginative structure of worlds and their inhabitants is depicted in the tarot, the figures in elaborate costumes being set against gorgeous textured backgrounds. On each card cats appear as guardians, companions, decorative forms, statues, totem animals, and often as major figures in the drama. The Tower (Major 16) itself is in the form of a large cat sculpture struck by a meteor or comet.



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Here, with our small set of sixteen Cat tarots, we have been exploring a little world within a world. We have seen how an artist or designer has had an idea, worked and played with it, until a clear conception arose for their cat tarot. For those interested in both cats and tarot this is a relatively small group of tarots to form into a collection and these are still inexpensive, only *Les Chats d'Evelyne Nicod*, the *Japan Cat Tarot* and the

Taro Gatti are difficult to find. Once you have some of these decks you will find it instructive to compare the different styles and approaches. We will find many of these little worlds of themed decks within the greater world of the tarot, and be exploring these in future lessons in our course.