

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



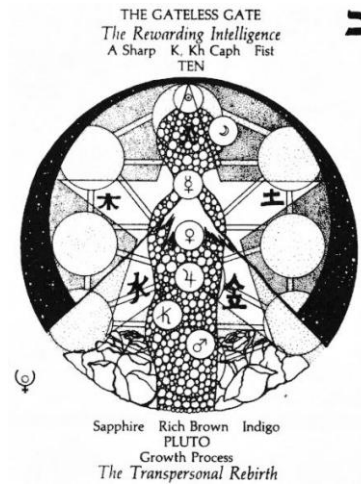
Lesson 14 : Round tarots

Tarot cards were originally cards for playing a game and like other playing cards they evolved into the familiar vertical rectangle, which is convenient for shuffling and dealing. But tarot artists are ever inventive and there were some experiments in circular designs and eventually some brave pioneers managed to find printers willing to print and cut circular cards.

- 1979 Angelic tarot - Amy Carroll (circular on rectangular cards)
- 1979 Cothic Tarot (unpublished designs by Cilla Conway) (ovals on rectangular cards)
- 1980 Nature Tarot (round cards)
- 1981 Motherpeace (round cards)
- 1982 Shekhinah's Tarot (unpublished round cards)
- 1984 Book of Aradia (round cards)
- 1986 Daughters of the Moon (round cards)
- 1987 Mandala Astrological Tarot (circular on square cards)
- 1991 Daughters of the Moon (coloured version)
- 1992 Cecilia Mayer Tarot (round cards)
- 1993 Songs for the Journey Home (round cards)
- 1993 Tarot of the Cloisters(round cards)
- 1994 Floral Ellipse (Elliptical cards)
- 1994 Granny Jones (ovals on rectangular cards)
- 1996 Tarot of the Rishis (unpublished)
- 1997 Oracle de Giselle Flavie (circular on rectangular cards)
- 2000 Scented tarot - Witta Jensen (round cards)
- 2001 Tarot del Arco Iris - Marcela Garcia (ovals on rectangular cards)
- 2002 Star that never walks around (round cards)
- 2003 Gaye Wright's Intuitive tarot ((circular on rectangular cards))
- 2004 The Intuitive Tarot - Cilla Conway (ovals on rectangular cards).
- 2004 Soul Tower Tarot - Cyvern7 (Oval cards)



Among the earliest is the wonderful Angelic tarot of Amy Carroll which has circular designs in pen and ink drawn on a standard format card with various phrases, correspondences and associations filling the open areas. She renames the cards the “Scintillating Intelligence”, the “Luminous Intelligence” etc., which are taken from the well-known Kabbalistic book the *Sepher Yetzirah*. The designs have a strong esoteric, magical



and kabbalistic structure, with many references to magical symbols and emblematic images, such as the Gnostic Phanes egg circled by the serpent, the Tetragrammaton in the heart, with other Christian, Egyptian and Eastern references. The Wheel of Fortune card even has the Kabbalistic tree of life with its ten sephiroth and paths. Though the designs were circular the cards were rectangular.

Also in 1979 Cilla Conway created oval designs on rectangular cards for a deck which she then called the Cothic tarot. You can see these in Kaplan’s *Encyclopedia of Tarot* Vol III, pages 152-153. After twenty years trying to get her wonderful paintings published as a deck, she eventually succeeded and these were issued in 2004 as *The Intuitive Tarot* (not to be confused with Gaye Wright’s deck of the same name).

The first deck issued as actual round cards appears to be the Nature tarot, published in Japan in 1980. This 22 card deck is entirely in European art style, as is common with the early Japanese tarots. The artwork was created by a graphics design studio under the direction of Alexandria Mokuseioh. The images are quite conventional being rather fine drawings sensitively watercoloured with good modeling of the forms, and incorporating all the standard tarot imagery. This is a beautiful little gem of early modern tarot art.



The next appearance of round tarots is in America. During the early 1980's a number of women artists were working on tarot designs based on round cards. These artists were all inspired by the feminist movement and they brought feminist imagery and concerns also into the designs for their decks. As these artists all knew each other, the exact historical sequence of these creations is not entirely clear and they worked together and influenced one another. One of the major inspirers of this group of decks must be Shekhinah Mountainwater. Her own Shekhinah's Tarot probably created in 1982 was never published as a deck, though the designs for some of the cards are included in her book *Ariadne's Thread : Workbook of Goddess Magic*. She devised five suits, four (Blades, Flames, Cups and Pentacles) correspond with the Minor arcana except that they have thirteen rather than fourteen cards (10 pips plus Maiden, Mother and Crone Goddesses), while the suit of Spirit has twenty cards associated closely to the Majors.



It seems very difficult to work out the exact sequence of publication of the Motherpeace, Book of Aradia and Daughters of the Moon, all round tarots produced during this period. Some were self-published and then later taken up by major publishers. One can consult the timeline of the Herstory of Women's Tarot at

<http://www.lelandra.com/comptarot/womanstarottimeline.htm>

but it is probably a bit more complicated than that. There appears to be an early Matriarchal tarot which was conceived at Samhain 1976 by Ffiona Morgan and Shekhinah Mountainwater, but this became modified and restructured into the Book of Aradia tarot around 1984. The Daughters of the Moon deck (1986) seems to have derived in turn from that. The Book of Aradia tarot appears to be named after Charles Godfrey Leland's classic book *Aradia or the Gospel of the Witches*, 1899 which recounts the story of Aradia, the daughter of the Roman goddess Diana, who comes to Earth to teach witchcraft and relieve Diana's worshippers of oppression. The dates given for the issue of the decks vary considerably in different sources. My copy of the Daughters of the Moon deck bears the date 1986, though Ffiona Morgan's website www.daughtersofthemoon.com gives a publication date of 1983 and Kaplan gives 1984, so there may have been some sequence of early printings. The Book of Aradia and the Daughters of the Moon tarots seem to have been different envisagings by different artists of this Matriarchal tarot, the designs for which do not seem to have survived and may only have existed as a concept. It is best if we look at these two in parallel.



The cards in both the Book of Aradia deck and the Daughters of the Moon have been renamed but they clearly retain tarot structure. We can see the connection between their 'Empress' cards which depict a woman in the act of giving birth. The Aradia has five suits, echoing Shekhinah's Tarot, and the suit of Aether incorporates many of the conventional major arcana. Thus the 'Maya' card is related to the Empress. With the Daughters of the Moon there is a conventional tarot structure of Major and Minors. The Empress is here named 'Mawu' and she is seen giving birth atop an elephant. The Hanged Woman cards are very similar and both decks use the title 'Reversal'. Finally let us look at the Star card from each deck. In both of the decks this retains its conventional title. We can see clearly how the artwork for each deck reflects the same underlying ideas and sentiments. If you are lucky to have copies of both decks, it will be very instructive to place them side by side and explore the links and the individual ways the different artists have chosen to depict the same image. The Book



of Aradia deck arose from the cooperative efforts of Shekhinah Mountainwater, Ffiona Morgan, with Jan van Slyke usually being credited with the actual drawings. The Daughters of the Moon again involved Shekhinah Mountainwater and Ffiona Morgan as the creators of the deck, with the actual drawings being credited to a number of different artists, Kate Taylor and Lily Hillwomyn being the major contributors. Most of the cards are signed by the individual artist. The Daughters of the Moon drawings were later coloured and issued in 1991.

The confusion of the early history does not detract from the fact that Shekhinah Mountainwater and Ffiona Morgan produced some exceptional re-envisioning of the tarot within the emerging movement exploring the feminine aspect of spirituality. These decks have been very influential on the development of tarot imagery. Their choice of the round form for the cards was perhaps intended to consolidate their reworking of tarot within a women centred

system, and signal a departure from what they saw as the constraints and angles of the rectangular card form.



The Motherpeace Round Tarot was self published in 1981 and quickly taken up by U.S. Games Systems who published this to the wider community in 1983/4. The deck was conceived by Vicki Nobel and Karen Vogel and the artwork was coloured by Lily Hillwomym, whom we saw was involved in the Daughters of the Moon tarot. The Motherpeace, was a tarot centered in the Great mother Goddess, but is perhaps more eco-feminist and inclusively multicultural than the Dianic or wiccan oriented decks of the Aradia or Daughters of the Moon. There are many references to classical mythology in the Majors, with design elements taken from Greek vases and sculptures as well as Egyptian symbolism. The Minor

arcana mirror back to us aspects of various indigenous peoples. Vogel wants to express the idea that in an earlier age the world lived in matriarchal Goddess-worshipping communities which became overrun and destroyed by patriarchal invaders from cold northern climates who brought and imposed the idea of the Father-Sky god. This, perhaps, rather naïve view, resonated with the politics and rhetoric of the 1980's and we can today see how the creators of this deck could be drawn to such a simplistic world view. Vicki Vogel pictured in her Minor arcana, these peoples associated to the East/Swords as the supposed indigenous peoples of Europe, South/Wands (Africa), West/Cups (Cretan) and North/Discs (pre-Colombian American indians). Although this deck has a strong political tone the expression of its artwork is gentle, with romanticized, inclusive and entirely positive images..

The Mandala Astrological Tarot was created by the astrologer and writer A.T. Mann. He presents us with square cards which have circular designs. The symbolism is entirely abstract being devoid of any human figures, though a skull appears on Death and an ape-like headless body on the Devil. The Minor arcana are rather simple and do not bear much emblematic material, but the Majors are very well thought out and constructed. Although the artwork is round, these are not in themselves classical mandalas which present symbols in a circular form dynamically balanced one against the other in the geometrical divisions of the space. Instead the symbolism is set primarily in the centre of the emblem space. Here the idea of the mandala is rather that the reader uses the square cards to construct mandalas which can be used for the readings. The artist is obviously very familiar with alchemical, kabbalistic, magical, mystical, Egyptian as well as astrological symbolism and bring all this to bear in creating his designs. In a few places he quotes symbolically from well known Western magical and



mystical emblems. The artwork will be a joy to anyone who delights in exploring a system of symbolic ideas, as this is very tightly constructed with no spurious, rogue or decorative elements. Each symbol is placed within the space with an intention, and thus everything in the design bears a meaning and significance. Colour is a very important component of this deck, and Mann uses Golden Dawn colour scales in depicting the symbolism.

The 1999's saw a continuing use of round cards or circular designs. I have not yet managed to obtain a copy of the Chilean artist Cecilia Mayer's Tarot but you can see black and white illustrations in *Manteia* Issue 7 and in Kaplan Vol IV, p 125. This would appear to be a deck with only female figures and faces. The artwork seems rather beautiful. It was originally produced as a small edition made by gluing photographs of the original 22 paintings onto card.

1993 saw the publication by U.S. Games Systems of the Tarot of the Cloisters by Michelle Leavitt. This was 78 card round Rider-Waite clone, with imagery translated into medieval style stained glass complete with leading. This leading appear rather modern in conception being rather thin and radiating more from the centre, rather than following the contours of the images as we find in real stained or painted glass. The box states that it "captures the essence of 13th century stained glass", but to my eyes it is rather too modern to evoke that period, however, it is a fine production, and the effect of the colours and the contrasting leading is effective.



The Songs for the Journey Home was created by two New Zealanders, Catherine Cook and Dwariko von Sommaruga who describe themselves as alchemists and artists. The 78 card round deck they have produced is a celebration of life. It has a strong ecological core to the imagery, but it rises above coarse political rhetoric and instead presents us with delightfully positive images. Thus the Devil card depicts, in its lower section, all sort of negativities which are transcended in the image of a tree growing out of a cloud. The artwork is a truly creative reworking of tarot imagery within the artists own concerns and pictorial language. They often use images of trees and the globe of the earth. The Minor arcana are called Earth songs, Wave songs, Wind songs

and Flame songs. The imagery here is truly captivating. For Catherine Cook and Dwariko von Sommaruga the 'Journey Home' must be to some idyllic perfected world, that could come about if only we humans just got on with the positive things about life on planet earth. They present us with 'songs' in the form of their pictorial images that can lead us to this positive vision. In the Magician we see him sewing up tears in the fabric of the Earth globe. Perhaps this is why they want to be seen as alchemists, transforming and transmuting the world into a better place by bringing its potential into



actuality. Thus this is a celebratory set of images, rather than one that opens us to darkness and gloomy despair. It rises above locating itself in antipodean concerns, nor does it focus on multi-culturalism as does the earlier Motherpeace. It transcends all this by exploring a more universal panoramic symbolism.

Beth Crawford's Floral Ellipse tarot, of course, uses flowers extensively. The Major arcana each have the image standing between or surrounded by a particular flower. The pip cards are associated with four different flowers, Cups with roses, Pentacles with varieties of daisy, Swords with poinsettias and Wands with dogwoods. The drawings in coloured pencil (or perhaps crayon) are soft and gentle in texture and contrast. The cards are upright ellipses. This is a well conceived and well executed deck, and will be a great delight to those who like flower imagery.



Giselle Flavie was one of the most famous clairvoyants in France in the late 1990's. She still undertakes private consultations in Paris, has written many books and taken part in radio and television programmes. In 1997 she issued her 'key of life' or the Oracle de Giselle Flavie. This is not an oracle deck but a true tarot with 22 cards. Being a clairvoyant, Giselle Flavie has of course 'channelled' the text of the little white book that goes with the cards. The art on the cards is by a Russian artist Marina Makovsky, the daughter of the famous Russian academic artist Konstantin Egorovich Makovsky (1839-1915). His daughter, who appears to have lived on into the 1950's, seems to have become one of the Russian émigrés who located to France after the Russian Revolution. I have been unable to find out anything about her. Giselle Flavie must, however, have come across some of Marina Makovsky's paintings and seen the opportunity to present these in the form of a tarot. Her art is not so technically accomplished as her father's wonderfully detailed oils but is strongly Russian in tone, reflecting Russian illuminated manuscripts and Icons. I doubt whether these were originally conceived as a tarot, though they seem to have been created as round paintings and not merely cropped to that shape. Giselle Flavie has made some fine choices to associate the paintings with a Major arcana card, and some work extremely well. One of



the delights of exploring modern tarot as an art form, rather than as a divinatory device, or esoteric system, is that one finds such little treasures as this. Few would probably ever have found their way to Marina Makovsky's art had they not been presented as a tarot. The artist

reverses her name when she signed her paintings - thus they have 'Aniram', and one of these, the painting used for La Lune, she even signed using Cyrillic script.

The Taiwanese deck by Cyvern7, presumably called the Soul Tower tarot, is in the shape of ovals. The images are computer modified, and some seem based on figurative forms from drawings or photographs which have been divested of detail and thrown out of focus so removing them from the ordinary that they become more archetypal and symbolic. These diffuse forms, however, still remain recognizable, and some seem as if drawn in light. This seems to give them a soul or spiritual resonance. The forms seem woven out of light, and there are often flowing areas of colour similar to diffuse or shifting clouds, and sharper radiating patterns appearing like fireworks or lightning bolts, however, this almost abstract imagery still seems to hold sufficient form for us to easily recognize the familiar tarot arcana.

