

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



Lesson 22 : Erotic themed tarots

Modern tarot, to some extent, draws upon the long tradition of standard playing cards as well as directly from historical tarot. Card games, being, in some environments, played by an exclusively male audience, it is not surprising that pin-up models, erotic and even pornographic playing cards designs have been in circulation for many years, predating the rise, since the 1960's, of modern tarot. This influenced the production of a number of erotic themed decks, examples of which we find in

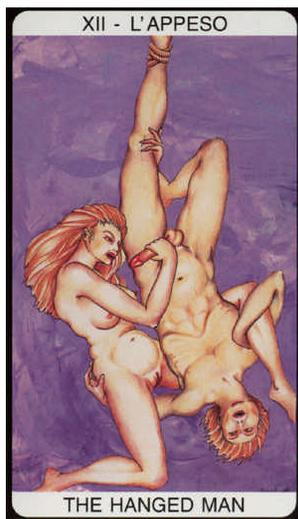
1992 Tarocco dei Giardini di Priapo - Amerigo Folchi

1993 Tarocchi del Decamerone - Giacinto Gaudenzi

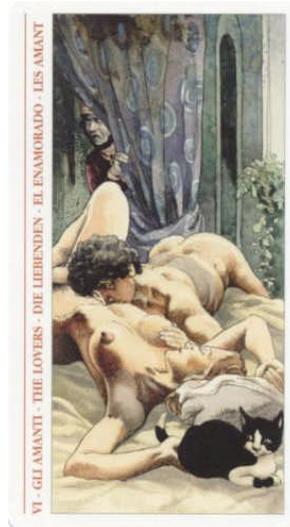
1998 Tarot Druuna - Paolo Serpieri (Jeu du Tarot)

2000 Manara: the Erotic Tarot - Milo Manara.

2002 Tarot Érotique - Luca Raimondo (issued as Tarot of Casanova by Lo Scarabeo)



Priapo



Decameron



Manara



Érotique -Casanova

These decks just take up the style of erotic playing cards and work this into a tarot deck. There seems to be no other underlying reason for the artwork apart from producing an entertaining set of images, though the designers may use the prop of the Decameron or Casanova stories. Milo Manara and Folchi need no such excuse.

Of course nudity is found in historical tarot, which derives partly from emblematic woodcuts. Nudity here is more archetypal than erotic. Thus even in the Tarot of Marseilles we find a number of cards with naked figures. Those on Judgement are figures rising from their graves and are naked for that reason. The female figures on The Star and The World are perhaps shown naked to emphasise that they are archetypal Goddess figures and not mere humans. This use of nudity, in depicting a naked human figure to represent a spiritual, angelic or divine being, is common in 15th through 17th century emblematic imagery, and is not intended to carry any erotic intent. Of course, some puritanical people may have perceived such depictions as erotically charged, and even sought to censure such tarot cards. It is rather interesting that even in our present age we have seen such censorship in tarot. In 1975 Marty Yeager created a tarot which used naked male and female figures on many of the major arcana. When the deck was reissued in 1982 by US Games Systems, they must have felt the cultural climate had changed somewhat from the 1970's and decided to paint clothing or decorative elements (essentially 'fig-leaves') over the offending genitalia. They targeted their censorship on the male figures, though some naked female figures also have their modesty preserved by some judicious vegetation. Strangely the writer of the LWB was left out of the loop and he shamelessly states "In this completely new deck, the artist advances the figure in the timeless costume of humanity - nakedness". He must have received a surprise when he saw the finished deck, now with the Fool walking over the cliff in a neat pair of trunks !

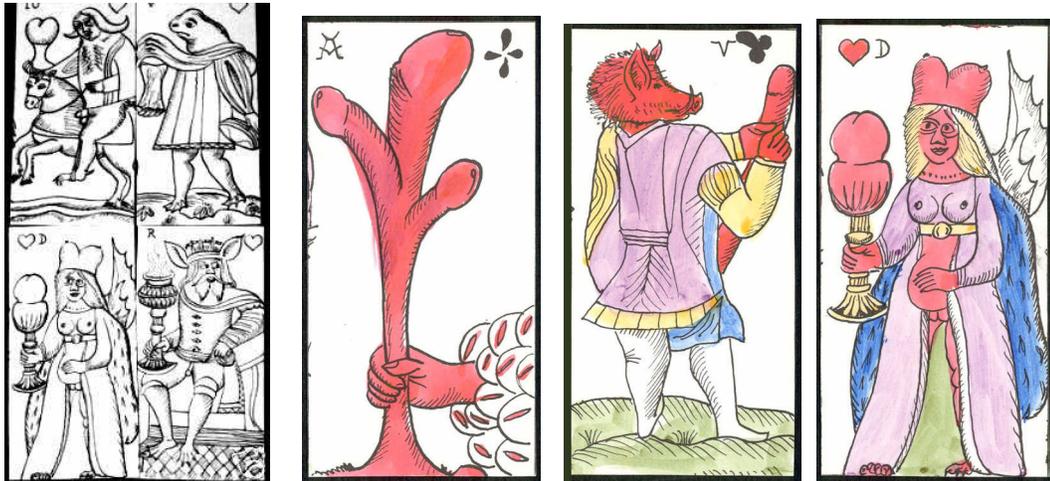


Many tarots have individual cards with a strong erotic content, but we will here consider decks and tarot designs that are primarily erotic in conception. There are also a number of decks in the popular fantastical art style which especially engages adolescents. These have a strong erotic charge, though they are not necessarily conceived as erotic tarots, but merely reflect the fantasy artwork style. An example can be seen in the Black Tarot of Luis Royo. Here scantily clad women often are embraced by strange demons. Women seem to be pictured in this type of artwork either as strong amazons fighting against evil figures, or else somehow held in some bondage or restraint, probably reflecting adolescent male fantasies. We will not here necessarily consider these fantasy art tarots under the heading of erotic tarots.



We come now to tarots which have an erotic element essential to their conception.

Charles Pry, whose Diableries Tarot was published as an actual deck in Brussels in 1970, would appear to be an artist fixated on the phallus. He presents a reworking of the Tarot of Marseilles into an erotic space. The devilry of these designs is in the playful use of sexual imagery. The penis rears its head but usually in some humorous context. This is Rabelaisian satire rather than pornography. The deck is eagerly sought after both for its erotic content and because of its early date and the fact that only 100 copies were issued. Some copies were coloured.



Another early erotic tarot is found in the drawings in back of the erotic novel by Esteban Lopez *Liebe & Tarock*, 1971-72.



XVI DIE ZERSTÖRUNG

0 DER NARR

XX DAS URTEIL

In a section at the end of his book, Lopez uses the imagery of the tarot to reflect back the themes of his novel. His eroticism seems perhaps rather phallicentric and his drawings appear almost like the doodlings of adolescents.

Another impulse, apart from humour, behind the creation of an erotic tarot lay in the esoteric idea of sex magic, which arose to some extent out of the writings of Aleister Crowley, the OTO and related magical orders. Here the sexual content was supposedly serving the higher purpose of some kind of magical or spiritual enlightenment. Among the earliest of these was the Sexual Tarot created by an English magician hiding behind the magical name Frater R. B-B. This was issued as a deck of 666 (naturally) numbered copies by the bookshop 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice'. R. B-B was not a particularly good draughtsman and though his drawings are not especially skilled, he obviously had a clear conception which he was trying to realise through creating his tarot images. Some of the card designs are quite conventional, though using some nudity, The Fool, High Priestess, Empress, Emperor, Hierophant, for example. Many of the cards depict sexual display and overt sexual activity. R. B-B seems unswervingly heterosexual in his imagery.



THE HERMIT



Eight of Wands



Four of Wands



Queen of Wands



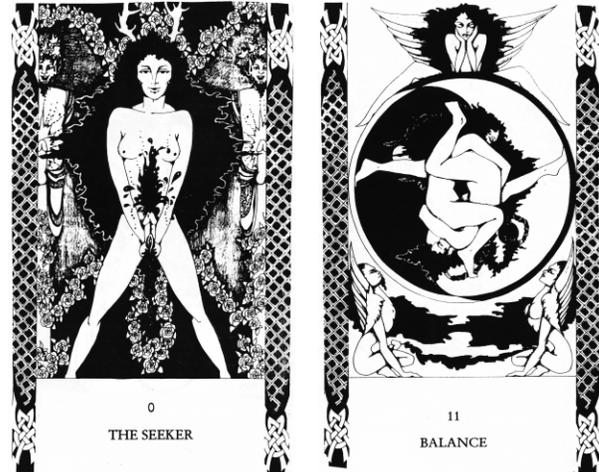
Two of Swords



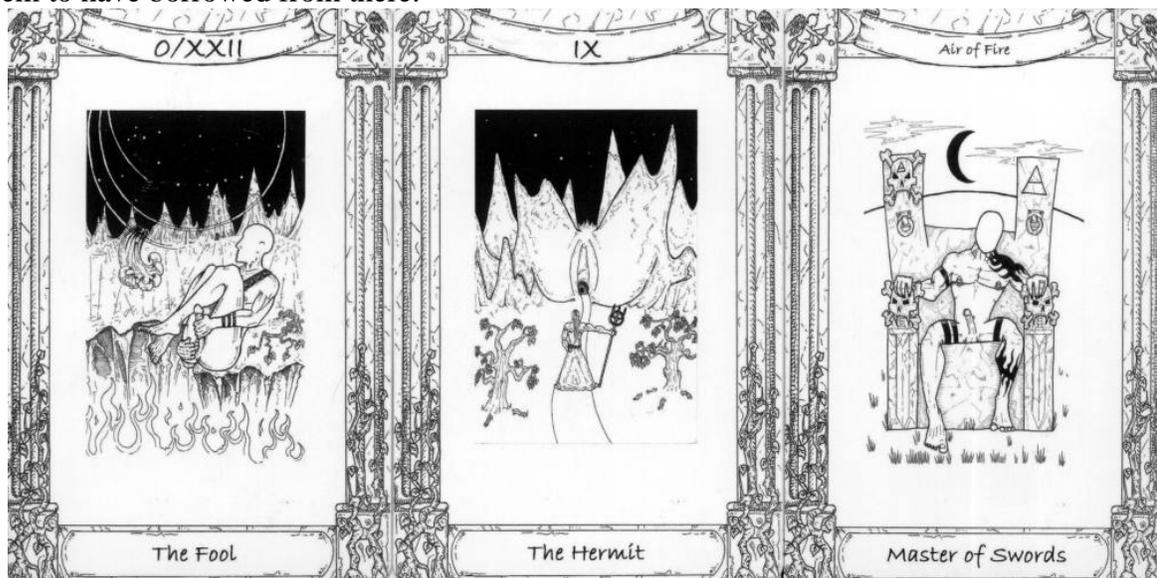
Two of Pentacles

The Tantric tarot by another British magician, Keith Morgan, was created some two decades later in 1994. This was issued as illustrations in a book, but though Morgan does not appear to have produced his Major arcana as an actual deck, he did sell it in the form of 22 large format prints. The artwork in pen drawings was actually made by Elizabeth Taylor. In his book Morgan presents himself as a High Priest of Wicca, but his tarot draws more upon the

constructed conception of Indian Tantric Yoga practices that was being devised in the 1980's and 90's. His ideas are not really drawn from Eastern sources but from the imagined 'tantra' of late 20th century esotericists and magicians. Morgan seems to draw on the OTO system for his imagery, thus the spelling 'Magick' throughout the book. The artwork is rather good, though illustrations in the book are reproduced so small that the fine details in the drawings are sometimes lost. The artist may well have seen the Sexual Tarot of R. B-B, as arcana 11 seems to display the interwoven male and female figures in much the same pattern. The sexuality of the imagery is no longer exclusively heterosexual, but has some lesbian and even male homosexuality displayed.



The Erotica Tarot by the Swedish seer and magician Ylva Trollstierna in collaboration with Patrik Carlsson and created in pen drawings by Pierre Brawin, was published in 2002. Like the previous two this uses sexual imagery as a kind of sex magic supposedly for the purposes of spiritual enlightenment, and Trollstierna issued a book on the 'practice of sexmagick' to be read in conjunction with this tarot deck. Brawin's drawings are rather finely executed. He leaves out the eyes and sometimes other features from the human faces which makes them appear almost like manikins so that we as viewers feel detached. The artist does not seem to have incorporated much overt humour into his imagery and some of the more sadistic images could be disturbing to the sensitive soul, however, the line drawing and the remoteness of the manikin figures makes it difficult to empathise with what is being depicted. The Fool would appear to be a hermaphrodite, strangely able to masturbate with both of his/her organs, while the Hermit lives in a vaginal cave. The Minor arcana of this 78 card deck have emblematic pips but these do not entirely follow the established Rider-Waite pattern, though in places the artist seem to have borrowed from there.



There is an interesting Sexmagick tarot by Philippe Pissier which was exhibited at the Musee de l'Erotisme in Paris in 2003. Images can be found in the internet but it does not seem to have been printed. The images, each incorporating a tarot of Marseilles arcanum, are collaged from magazine images, cartoons, alchemical emblems, photographs, magical diagrams and text. Pissier works within the Thelemic/ Crowley/OTO sphere of magical ideas. The collage here is multilayered and delightfully complex. Here is the Hermit.



The Tarot Erotica of Lori Walls stands in a place of its own. It is a beautiful painted tarot with each image conceived afresh. The artwork, although in the fantastical art style, is created in oils and has a more earthly and grounded feel, as it does not use the high gloss, smooth airbrushed look favoured by the practitioners of that art form. Lori Walls' images engage us directly as paintings and her brushwork and modelling of forms is clearly visible and not smoothed away. I have unfortunately not been able to find any other examples of her work. Her Tarot Erotica was published in 1999 so one might have expected to see other works by her, but she seems to have disappeared from view, which is sad because she is such a good painter. Her deck does not seem to be based on the Crowley/OTO sex magic, but leans perhaps more towards neo-paganism. There is a strong structure or narrative to her Minor arcana suits. Rods and Swords seem to focus on masculine aspects. To Walls, Rods is Man the masculine who enjoys competition, while Swords is Man in touch with his feminine side. Cups is the feminine Female, the lover of men, nourisher of children and protector of small animals, while her suit of Stars is the Female in touch with her masculine side. Using this structure she is able to bring into her imagery a wide range of depictions of erotic material. She is not afraid to use bisexuality, lesbianism, male homosexuality and some domme-sub imagery to illustrate her ideas. Her artwork does not appear to be driven by angst, hurt or inner pain, and though she deals with the powerful emotions of sexuality in an explicit way, this is a gentle and open view, with no disturbing subtext. She does not appear to be a wounded soul turning to art to excise her inner demons. Her designs tend to have a core image that one initially engages with, but there are other details of symbolism in the background that do not strike one immediately. Some of these details draw upon Greek, Egyptian and various pagan mythologies.



Her Star, Moon and Sun cards are very interesting because they all use the image of the human body to depict in three different ways the symbolic content of these arcana. Lori Walls obviously paints out of deep thought. These are not paintings that have grown on the canvas by merely emoting the imagery, but are well structured thought-out emblems. This deck is out of print and the company that published seems to have disappeared, so this deck will be quite collectable.

Paganism, with its sense of fun, can break down the rather heavy seriousness of the Thelemic/OTO/Tantric tradition. Despite the ideas of Aleister Crowley and the tantrics, sex is surely not a serious activity for spiritual enlightenment, to be performed like a prayer, and erotic images are not merely a form of scripture. Thank God for the Pagans! A rather delightful erotic pagan deck is the Tarot of the Ayrshire Witches. The cartoon style line art was created by John Upton for use within a Garnerian Witchcraft coven in Ayrshire, Scotland. K. Frank Jensen, the well known tarot enthusiast and publisher in Denmark, coloured these images and printed a very small edition of six copies in 2000. It is a 78 card deck, and the pips are emblematic but with no relation to the Rider/Waite Minors. The roughly drawn pictures benefit greatly from being watercoloured, and Jensen has used a coherent yet restricted palette of colours. Thus the dominant green background of most cards integrates them together and helps to keep the sense of pagan Nature worship. Most of the human figures are naked and the deck shows various aspects of witchcraft ritual, the instruments of the craft, and some historical tableaux reflecting aspects of witchcraft persecution.



The Devil card uses the familiar image of the Celtic horned god Cernunnos. Upton also uses this for his King of Wands and lifts the image from the famous Gundestrup cauldron (1st or 2nd century BC) much beloved by modern pagans, however, he embellishes the god with an erection. The Two through Six of Cups shows the fivefold ritual kiss of modern witchcraft (at the lips, the breast, the genitals, the knees and the feet). As Garnerian ritual states

“Blessed be thy feet, that have brought thee in these ways.
 Blessed be thy knees, that shall kneel at the sacred altar.
 Blessed be thy phallus, without which we would not be.
 Blessed be thy breasts, formed in strength.
 Blessed be thy lips, that shall utter the Sacred Names.”

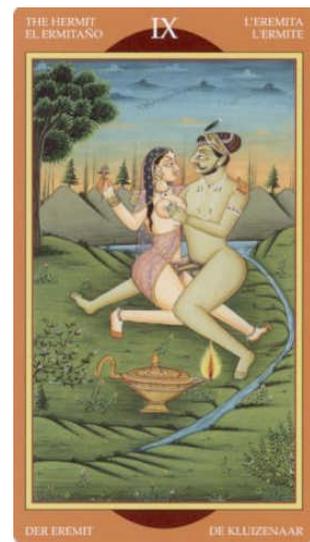
The deck depicts in other sequences of cards, different parts of the Gardnerian Witchcraft initiation rituals. The Summoner of Wands even has the now familiar image of the Wicker Man. Strangely, there are two designs for the Seven of Swords - one being based on an early 16th century woodcut image and the other on the Henry Fuseli painting *The Nightmare*, 1781.

Let us now leave behind the magical and pagan inspired erotic decks to look at Shandra MacNeill's *Skins Deck*. Since 1993 this Canadian artist has produced a number of tarot decks. In her *Skins Deck*, issued in 2002, she uses the mixed media, watercolour, gouche and metallic paint on black water colour paper. She restricts herself to earth colours ochres, browns and greys, these being further muted by being painted on the black ground. The cards are all cut irregularly by hand and are intentionally of slightly different sizes. This makes them immediately feel unique and distinct from all other tarot decks. The deck presents a narrative of the journey of a young woman exploring her sexuality. It begins with her as the Fool standing naked



and gazing at her bed, the place for her sexual explorations. Next as the Mage, she seems to revel in her powers to attract and allure. Then through the remaining Major arcana we are shown, in a series of tableau, her various sexual experiences, and finally with the World card we see her dancing alone, confident and seemingly liberated. In her journey we see her with her lover or lovers in explicit intimate situations though the dark sombre tones of the paintings and their expressionistic style of the artwork mean that they cannot really be viewed in a prurient way. Here we are being taken on a sensitive exploration, using the tarot structure, of a young woman's journey to her mature sexuality.

In remarkable contrast to MacNeil's earthy grainy images is the highly polished *Kamasutra Tarot* issued by Lo Scarabeo in 2006. The artwork is based on the well known 18th and 19th century Indian paintings illustrating the ancient manual of love and sexual guidance, the *Kamasutram*, which dates back to the early centuries A.D. Lo Scarabeo opts not to use these earlier paintings but instead commissioned the Art School Vijai and Ram of Rajasthan to produce a series of paintings in this style. These are truly remarkable reconstructions of the original artwork style and preserve all the charming stylistic elements. It was, of course, impossible on most cards for the artists to make their imagery reflect the tarot structure, so these indications are added as subsidiary symbols in the background or sometimes foreground - thus the key for the Hierophant, scales for Justice, lamp for the Hermit. Thus the imagery



is not entirely integrated into an actual tarot, but as this melding of the two structured systems would be extremely difficult and contrived, if not impossible to devise, one just takes delight in the power of the art itself.



We will conclude with the Russian Astar tarot issued in a very small edition of 10 copies in 2005 but printed as a mass market deck in 2006. It was created by Vladimir Strannikov and Alexy Kluev through collaging photographs and other graphic materials. Astar is the Russian name for Astarte, the Semitic Goddess of fertility and sexuality. Many cards have naked human bodies, mostly taken, one suspects from soft-core adult magazines. This is a 78 card deck and the Pips are also symbolic, though not based on the classic Rider-Waite emblematics. The Court cards are immediately recognis-

able from their structure (the Knight, for example, always appears with a horse), but the Pips do not have any obvious structure to their imagery. The Majors depict closely the usual tarot structure, though seen through the artists' idiosyncratic style. Though some of the collages are really well constructed and have some neat clashes of symbolism, there does not seem to be a firm underlying structure or idea being followed. In a sense they do not forcibly challenge us with their image constructions as many other collage decks do, however, perhaps they do intrigue, tease and puzzle us. Consider, for example, the image of the half-naked female model making a painting of a half-naked female. The artists create subtlety rather than attempting the immediate engagement of the viewer. There is a sober quality to the images and almost none of the figures engages us with a smile, instead they look morose or detached. There is much social and political comment, but only a little humour (and that is restrained). This is, however, an interesting original deck to have emerged out of Russia in the past few years. The direction and intentions of the artists in creating this deck remains obscure and we are left uncertain to its purpose.

This is by no means an exhaustive survey of erotic themed tarots. There are many others to find, view and describe, however, we can see that they fall into different groupings, some merely entertaining while others are designed for some purpose, to illustrate a perspective on the world or present some magical/esoteric philosophy.