

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

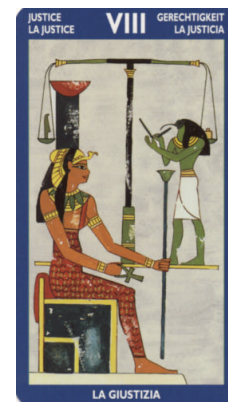
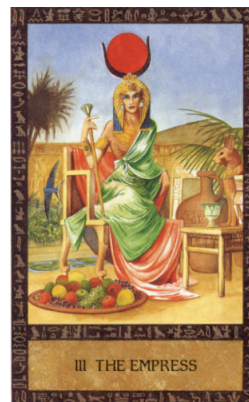


## Lesson 6 : The different types of tarot - Themed decks

In lesson three we looked at tarot designs as falling into categories based on the intention of the creators in making the deck - for cartomancy, as an art deck, self-development deck, magical, humorous, promo, etc. Another way of looking at the artwork of some tarot decks is to group them under various themes. Thus we see that there are :-

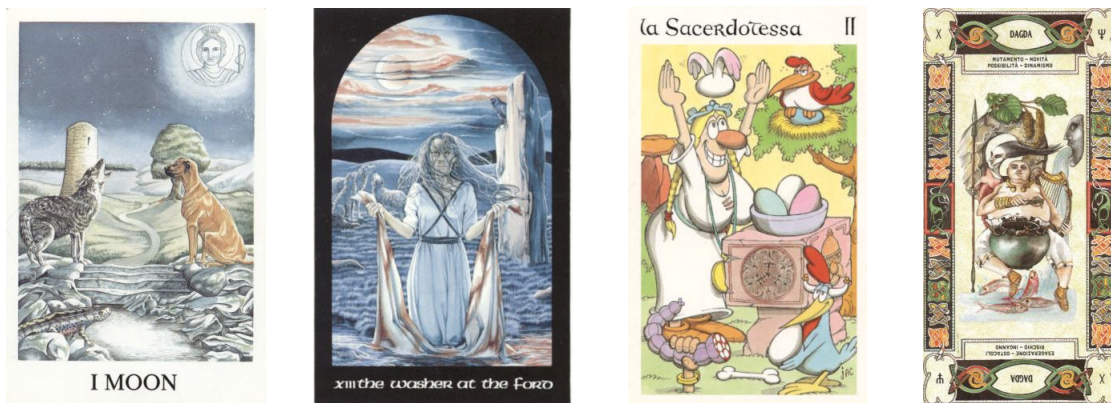
- Egyptian decks
- Celtic decks
- Shamanistic decks
- Pastiche, or decks in the style of a particular artists
- Erotic
- Dark or Gothic
- Cat tarots, and so on.

One of the first such themed decks to emerge was the Egyptian deck. One was produced as early as 1896 as 22 pen drawings by Otto Wegener which were published in the book *Les XXII lames hermétiques du tarot divinatoire* by R. Falconnier. This deck 'Egyptianised' tarot, and later led to a plethora of such Egyptian tarots. In my own collection there are about 30 such Egyptian tarots and there are a number more still to find. Here are just a few examples beginning with the *Zain Brotherhood of Light* deck (1936) which was the first to follow up on the Wegener deck, the images being redrawn by Gloria Beresford and the minor arcana cards added.



Next we have another influential tarot, the *Egyptios Kier* produced in 1970 in Argentina. A number of tarots, especially in South America, derive from this. In the last few decades some very fine workings of Egyptian imagery into tarots were created, such as the Clive Barrett *Ancient Egyptian Tarot* shown third above. The final item is the *Tarot of the Sphinx* by Silvana Alasia, 2000, copying the style of the images on the walls of Egyptian tombs. We will devote a complete lesson to the diversities of Egyptian tarots later in this course.

In the 1980's there arose the construction of a 'celtic' esotericism, based on some early Welsh and Irish mythological texts intermixed with Holy Grail esoterics. A rush of books appeared to popularise this newly devised Celtic esoteric philosophy, and the tarot creators were not far behind these publications. These primarily arose out of British occultists, such as Dion Fortune, Gareth Knight, John and Caitlin Matthews, Bob Stewart, among others. Their books, written in the 1970's and 80's, were extremely influential in constructing this stream of 'Celtic' esotericism, and this quickly shaped the development of some tarot decks. We will find, confusingly, a number of different tarot designs each called the 'Celtic Tarot', then we have *Celtic Wisdom*, *Celtic Dragon*, *Arthurian*, *Avalon*, *Merlin*, *Greenwood*, *Tarot of the Druids* and so on. There were a few early unpublished tarots which explored the Celtic theme, but the main group of Celtic tarot decks appears from about 1990. Bob Stewart's *Merlin Tarot*, was among the first, being issued in 1988. The deliciously soft and yet detailed artwork for this deck was by Miranda Gray. Bob Stewart restructures the deck to reflect his understanding of the Merlin myths. The major arcana are renumbered and the suits are Serpents, Birds, Fishes and Beasts, mirroring the four elements. A few years later Miranda Gray was again called on by the same UK publisher, Aquarian Press, to produce designs for a Celtic tarot, the *Arthurian Tarot* of Caitlin and John Matthews. Her wonderful paintings are here even more sharply drawn.



Some of these Celtic tarots are rather solemn, severe and self-absorbed, such as *Legend: The Arthurian Tarot* of Anne-Marie Ferguson of 2003 or the *Celtic Tarot* of Julian de Burgh issued in 2000, but this was countered by the Italian Celtic tarots issued by Lo Scarabeo which are more irreverent and humorous. Here we see the *Tarocchi dei Celti* 1991 by Benito Jacovitti the Italian comic artist who died in 1997, and the *Laura Tuan I Tarocchi Celtici* of 1997. Lo Scarabeo has published at least five Celtic themed tarot decks.

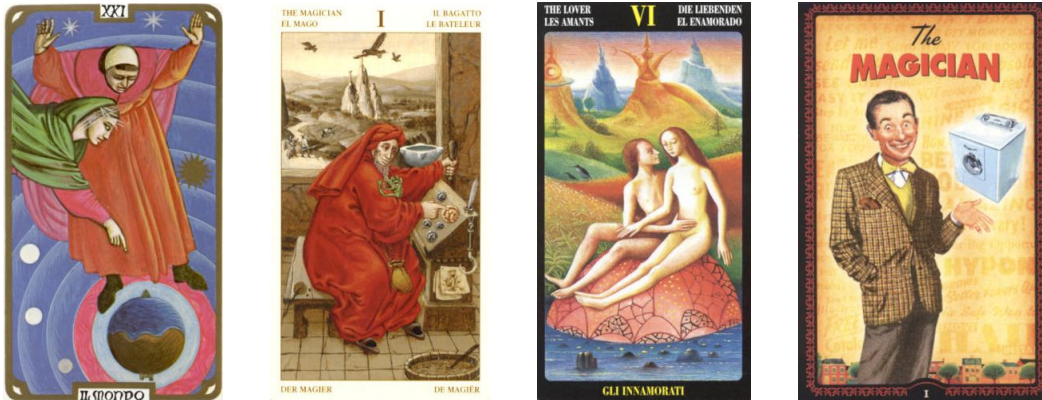
Paralleling the development in the 1970's and 1980's of a 'Celtic esotericism', we also saw the emergence of interest in a reconstructed esoteric shamanism. This was perhaps partly inspired by the 'factional' books of Carlos Castaneda, who presented shamanistic practices in a way that was approachable by the twentieth century mind. A rash of books appeared in which the authors trawled through anthropological research and repackaged this for the emerging esoteric audience, and the somewhat crude superstitious practices of tribal peoples, became elevated to deep spirituality. This impacted on and was reflected in tarot. Tarot artists seem always close to interesting new ideas and quickly soak up an emerging perspective and give it a tarot form. So shamanistic themed decks began to appear. Many of these drew on the perceived imagery of North American indigenous tribes, though seen perhaps through a veil of romanticism. Thus we have the *Native American* of 1982, *Medicine Woman* 1990, *Santa Fe* 1994, *Tarot of the Southwest Sacred Tribes* 1996, the *Vision Quest Tarot* produced in 1998, which rapidly expanded to include other indigenous cultures such as that of the Australian Aborigines celebrated in the *Australian Contemporary Dreamtime Tarot* of 1991 and early stone age culture in the *Rock Art Tarot* of 1996.



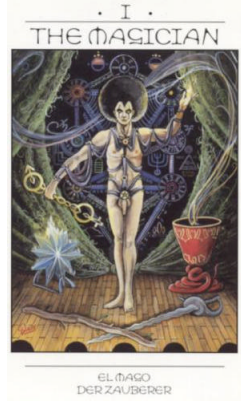
There developed among some tarot creators from the 1980 onward a wish to create a deck in the style of some well known artist. We could pejoratively label this as pastiche, but it is often a more positive wish to honour or reflect in some way a well loved artist through the medium of a creating a tarot in their style. Among the earliest of these must be Wolfgang Poggi *I Tarocchi di Dante e dei Fedeli d'Amore* which was printed in Milan in 1983. These large cards are in the style of 15th Century Italian painting. As a conceit the artist has signed the Magician card "Anonimo Bolognese del XX sec" - indicating that this is by an unknown artist of Bologna during the 20th century.

The Italian mass market tarot publisher Lo Scarabeo has commissioned a number of this type of deck, such as their *Giotto Tarot* of 2001 painted by Guido Zibordi in style similar to Poggi's 'Dante' of some 18 years earlier. In 2003 they issued the *Breugel Tarot* by Guido Marchesi. Atanas Atanassov, a Bulgarian artist, is perhaps the real master of this form and he has made a number of these tarots for Lo Scarabeo, the *Bosch Tarot* of 2000, the *Leonardo da Vinci* of 2003, the *Golden Tarot of Klimt*, and a few others. The *Bosch Tarot* is so well constructed. This is no 'cut and paste' collage, but a repainting of the imagery into a tarot context. Those who know well Hieronymous Bosch's paintings will recognise the scenes on which Atanassov has drawn. He simplifies the artwork a

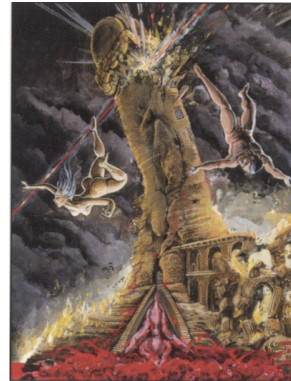
little and focuses it into serving the purpose of directly reflecting tarot imagery. It is not just high art that can be used as a stylistic model for a tarot deck. We find for example the wonderfully humorous conception of the *Housewives Tarot* of 2004 which is in the style of 1950's American consumer advertising and packaging imagery. This is even provided in a box imitating the way in which people collected recipes on cards back in the 1950's and 60's.



Playing cards with erotic designs have been produced for many years so it is not surprising perhaps that this theme appeared in a number of tarot decks. Of course, some of the individual tarot arcana have lent themselves to an erotic interpretation, the Lovers and the Devil being the two obvious examples, but some tarot artists went the full way and placed all the cards into an erotic context. *Tarot Druuna* (1998), being a jeu de tarot, or French deck used for playing the card game, is perhaps closest to the conception of playing cards with erotic designs. It is based on the main character Druuna in a series of science fiction comic book stories the *Morbus Gravis* by Paolo Eluteri Serpieri. She seems to be merely a vehicle for Serpieri's rather adolescent fixations, and the *Tarot Druuna* will not disappoint that readership (or perhaps "viewership"). The American artist Lori Walls has created a *Tarot Erotica* with amazingly detailed paintings. She brings an erotic component to each of the cards, some of which have rather disturbing imagery, however this is not the adolescent view of Serpieri but a more mature conception. We should not fail to mention the infamous erotic tarot by Amerigo Folchi. Folchi's work has often had an erotic charge to some of the cards, but in 1991 he must have almost exhausted himself creating his *Tarocco Erotico dei Giardini di Priapo*, his "erotic tarot of the garden of penises". Priapus is the Greek male God of fertility usually depicted with an erect phallus. Folchi's work here, though totally explicit, is in a cartoon style and full of humour, and this tarot deck should not offend too many people. The most recent erotic deck I have seen is the *Astar* or *Astaroth Tarot* from Russia issued in 2006. This is a collage deck, most of the cards of which have an erotic content. Astaroth is the name of a demon in western magic, who tried to seduce souls into hell through offering them worldly delights. There are a number of other erotic decks whose approach to the subject is unique and distinctive, so we will devote a lesson later in this course to surveying the variety of erotic decks. Many of the erotic tarots seem to depict the Tower as an erect penis!



Here are the Tower cards from the Folchi, the Swedish Ylva Trollstierna *Erotica Tarot*, the Esteban Lopez and the Lori Walls.



There are many themes one finds explored by tarot artists. We will look at cats and gothic themed decks in some detail shortly and the next lesson will show a small group of decks on a rather specialist theme.