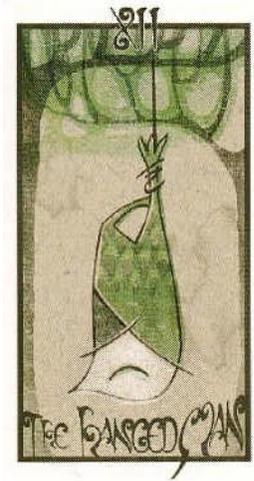


# Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot

## Lesson 17 : Regional tarots - Japanese



Most Japanese Tarots seem to have been intended for a Japanese audience rather than being distributed to the wider world and consequently many are unknown to American and European tarot enthusiasts, being difficult to collect. The earliest Japanese tarot I have been able to find is a Tarot of Marseilles style deck published by Keishobou in 1973, with the artwork by Gaichi Muramatsu.



(魔術師)

In 1974 a black and white pen drawn tarot called the Japanese Egyptian was issued by Futami Shobo in Tokyo. This to some extent drew upon the Falconnier/Wegener late 19th century tarot designs which had inspired a long line of Egyptian tarots. The Minor arcana of this Japanese 78 deck are based on the emblematic forms in the Rider-Waite deck but here 'Egyptianised'. This was reprinted in 1980 and 2003 in an alternative version, photo-reversed, as white on black



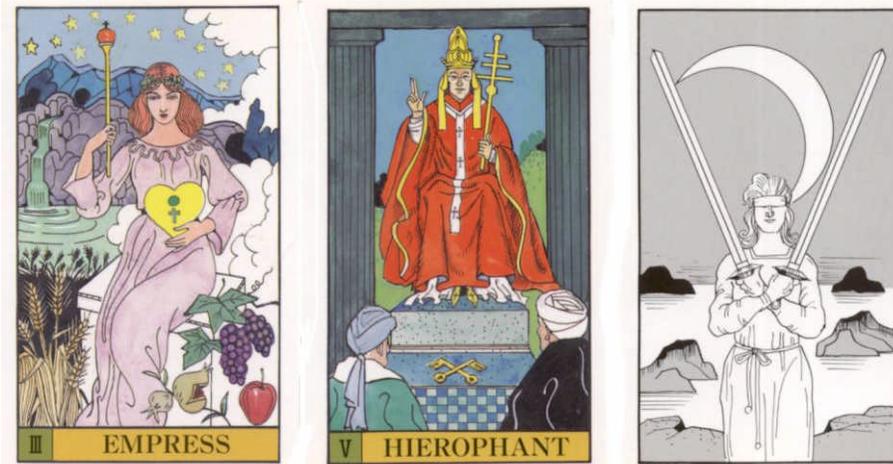
(魔術師)

Another early deck is the Renaissance Style Tarot published in 1978, the Magician of which is shown opposite. This was printed in black and white, though the original artwork (by an uncredited artist) appears to be in watercolours. There was also the Nature Tarot printed in 1980 which we looked at in the lesson on Round Tarots.

It is likely that Tarot was originally seen by the Japanese as an entirely European tradition which, though it fascinated them, the artists did not immediately try and relocate tarot imagery within Japanese cultural forms. Thus many of the decks produced in the 1980's were tribute decks, echoing the European and American tarot images that they had been exposed to. So we find then a number of Rider-Waite clones, which though redrawn and not slavishly copied, nevertheless retain a European cultural form, even to the extent of the facial types.



An example of this is the Tarot Fortune Telling cards by Will and Shigeyuki Ozawa, 1989. Here only the Majors of this Rider-Waite clone were printed in colour.



It is really amazing to see how the various Japanese graphics artists took up the tarot format and elaborated it into a variety of styles, almost all European. Thus we have George Domon's Tarot Fortune Telling for Love published in 1989, with its exquisite paintings and the underlying strongly detailed drawings.



During this late 80's and into the 1990's, Japanese tarot flourished. Many of the publishers adopted a packaging format where the book and the deck were issued in a surrounding printed sleeve. The deck itself was enclosed in a little folder with a foam pad which was cut away to provide a protective pocket for storing the cards. A number of the decks during this period were Majors only decks. Although these decks were issued with books with instructions as to how to use the cards for divination, one suspects that these were collected more as artworks.



Many styles were mimicked, such as art nouveau, in the Mysterious Tarot Fortune Telling Cards of Nobotu Aoki, published in Tokyo in 1989;



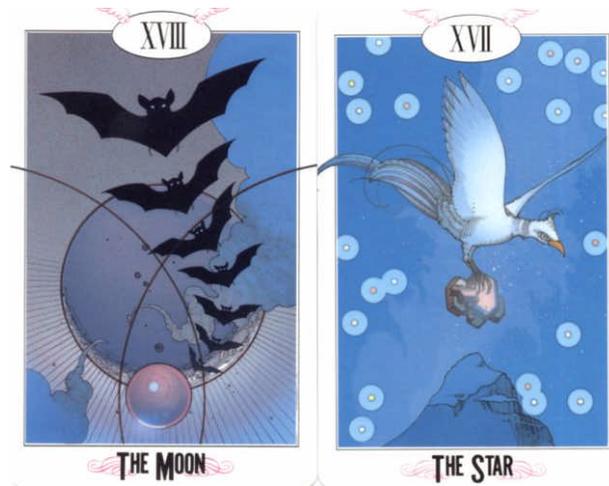
or the more art deco inspired style of K.H. Nicholas' Tarot of Love which calls Happiness, Tokyo, 1991, with the illustrations by Belne;



or the almost Aubrey Beardsley style of the Moonprincess Tarot of Kyoko Tsuchiya, 1989 (which is not to be confused with the later and better known Moonprincess Himiko Tarot of 1993).



As Japanese tarot developed through the 1990's, artists began to create their own images, rather than just reworking the traditional images in various classical styles. Alexandria Mokuseioh having produced the Nature tarot and the stylish Newwave in 1980, the Tarot Of Wicca in 1983 and her Cat Tarot in 1990, began to move Japanese tarot imagery further forward with her Crystal Tarot of 1991. Here, though the imagery remains firmly rooted in the conventional tarot archetypes, the designer has begun to extend the material further with the associations with crystals and allow new creative ideas to shape the pictures. There is even a mini CD included with the deck, giving a synthesizer sound track with a spoken meditation in Japanese and English.



In the same year, 1991, Ariadne Yuko's Tarot 22 was published. The artwork was by Toshiko Tsuchihashi, an illustrator who has produced designs for albums and book illustrations including children's literature. Here Tsuchihashi applied her unique style to creating a tarot. She adopts strange exaggerated rounded forms for the bodies, which are multicoloured with some of the features, eyes, mouths, etc., often reduced to odd geometric forms. The noses are sometimes elongated like elephants trunks. She even personifies the Tower by giving it a face. This tarot is quite a radical departure

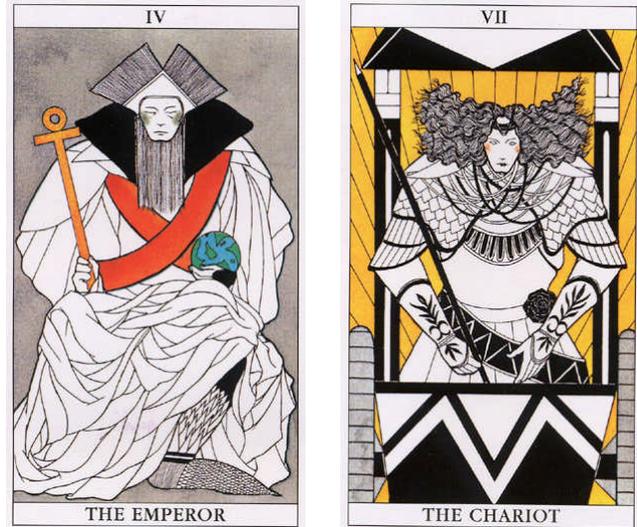
from earlier Japanese tarots in that it moves away from the classic art styles to a creative reworking, here into abstract forms like to children's drawings. Though they might initially appear surreal and disturbing, they are really childlike and fun images.

1991 was good year for Japanese tarots as it saw the publication of one of the most creative and delightful of decks, that of Yoshitaka Amano. These amazing detailed and wonderfully coloured drawings are best appreciated in the full page illustrations in the artbook about this deck. Many of the characters seem to brood, be inwardly active and contemplating their situation. The Devil and the Star are indicative of the style and power of his imagery. Amano had earlier produced a number of illustrated fantasy



books, some theatre designs and had worked on the important animated film *Angel's Egg* of 1984. He brought all his style and influences to a focus in his tarot deck. In Amano, Japanese tarot loudly shouted that it had arrived and had something original to say.

Yoshitaka Amano's work was totally modern and he located his tarot in his contemporary Japanese cultural landscape of the 1980's and 90's. Mondo Oki and Mei Unasaka issued their Big Arukana 22 (Major arcana) deck in 1991. This looked backwards to earlier Japanese cultural depictions of figures in prints, and though not slavishly copying these forms, distilled their essence into tarot images. Oki and Unasaka also produced in this same year their Derakkusu ban Hihou Tarot, which is more 19th century European fin de siècle in its artistic focus.



There are many interesting and beautiful Japanese tarot decks of the late 1980's and early 90's, but a new turn of the Japanese wheel of tarot was about to occur through the evolution of manga comics and computer assisted anime which came increasing to dominate Japanese youth culture from the mid-1990's onward. The Gundam Wing tarot of Ugeppa (probably 1996) which we have looked at before in this course, keeps close to the traditional tarot imagery, though the characters are drawn from the anime. The 'gundams' are mechanised fighting suits are the key element of the cartoon, but here they do not intrude much on the tarot.



The tarot *La Fillette Révolutionnaire* (the revolutionary girl) of 1998, is based on a series of five Japanese Manga *Utena* published by Suehirogaru. This tells the story of Utena, an orphan, who mysteriously receives every day a letter sealed with a rose from a secret society, the Ohtori School. The series of comic books follows her adventures in search of her destiny. The card images chosen closely reflect the traditional tarot, though the pictures are all from the manga book. Strangely there are two Empress cards.

These seem to show the two different sides to our Revolutionary girl, Utena. Many of the cards incorporate roses, reflecting the secret society of the dark rose.

Another deck based on anime from this period is the Sailor Moon. This was initially a manga comic series which was later made into an anime series for television. The heroine of this set is a young schoolgirl named Rabbit, who meets a black cat who tells her that she is the

reincarnation of a former lunar warrior, 'Sailor Moon'. Then the action begins.



The Sailor Moon tarot was issued free with a German magazine in 1999, being an example of a promo deck.

The Sol Bianca tarot (1999) was printed in the USA but based on a well known Japanese science fiction style anime. Sol Bianca is a spaceship with a crew of five female space pirates. Strangely they are named after months. There is Jani, the violent one, Feb, their drunken leader, April, who is idealistic and vengeful, May, who even though she is still a child is able to control a missile-firing mechanical robot suit, and Jun, the resident technical genius. There is surely a touch of the gothic about these characters.



Many manga and anime tarots began to emerge, with also tarots based on computer games. Once tarot became established as a promotional item or even revenue raising merchandising, the motivation perhaps for creating a tarot deck changed. Taiwanese publishers especially began to issue 'tarots' or rather set of 78 cards bearing images from their anime show. With decks such as Full Metal Alchemist the roots in the archetypal tarot arcana began to be lost.

The future of Japanese tarot does not necessarily rest, however, in the hands of the manga/anime promoters, and we have seen a continuing creation of fine quality decks by Japanese artists. In 2001 the art photographer Yukinori Tokoro, produced a Majors only deck of really large cards. He uses digitally modified and manipulated photographs of models he has posed. There is a sumptuous use of glowing diffused lighting effects and a sometimes surreal choice of imagery. The Death card is especially engaging, with the female reaper holding a human head in a birdcage.



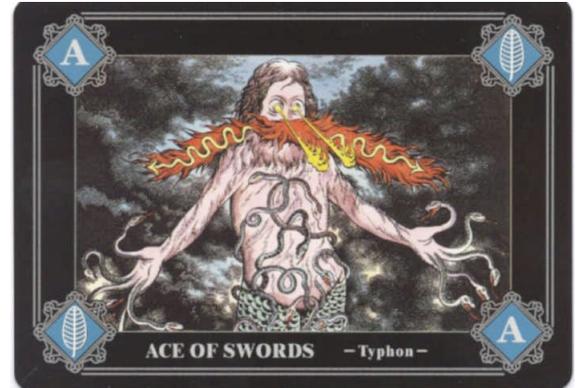
The Yukari Ichijo Tarot, which was issued in 2003 is a return perhaps to more classical tarot imagery through her wonderfully detailed painted drawings. Unfortunately the cards are printed too small to do justice to the art work. Although Yukari Ichijo works primarily as a manga illustrator, she has put this aside in creating her tarot. Instead she seems to locate her tarot somewhere in the medieval Middle East, in a realm of imagery close to the imaginative world of Scheherazade.



We can look again at the Shigeo Otake book of tarot illustrations published in 2005, which was mentioned in an earlier lesson. This Kinoko Tarot was created in 1995 and draws inspiration from the earlier writer Terayama Shuji who died in 1983 and had produced with the artist Usuki a small edition tarot which is almost completely unknown even in Japan. In his tarot Otake dwells on the theme of mushrooms. The artwork with its strange modeled rounded forms echoes perhaps that of Toshiko Tsuchihashi's Tarot 22.



Finally, we have a recent tarot which returns to the older Japanese superstitions of the Yokai, the world of spirits. This tarot (usually called the Monsters Tarot in English) by Youtaro and Takeshi Ogasawara, was inspired by the artist Shigeru Mizuki, an older Japanese artist who is immersed in the old tales of the Yokai and brought some of these into his manga art. He is well known for creating *Gegege no Kitarou*, a childrens' manga and animated series revolving around the ghosts, goblins and spirits of traditional eastern folklore. This 78 card tarot draws on world mythology, rather than merely on Japanese spirits. So we have mythological creatures from Greek, Celtic, Norse, Chinese, Indian and other traditions apart from Japanese. The cards themselves are in landscape format and sadly printed rather too small for the detailed images. These appear to be computer collage with some redrawing and at first glance they look as if they are newly drawn, however, on deeper examination it seems that the foreground figures are on a separate layer from the backgrounds. Some of these foreground figures are no doubt taken from Shigeru Mizuki's cartoons, while the backgrounds appear to be taken from prints, engravings or photographs, some apparently redrawn. The Majors follow the usual archetypes quite closely, but the Minors are unique and don't seem to link to other systems of emblematic images. The artwork is superb and this tarot justifiably fetches a high price.



This lesson is just a short survey of Japanese tarot attempting to give an overall view of the diversity of the material and the trends in the artwork. There are so many beautifully designed Japanese tarots, that it is impossible to do the subject justice in merely a few pages. I myself have managed to collect over 60 Japanese tarots and there are many more than that. There is a listing of over 90 decks in Kaplan's Volume IV, but it is not exhaustive. One could devote a whole study course just to Japanese tarot.

Japanese tarots certainly have style.