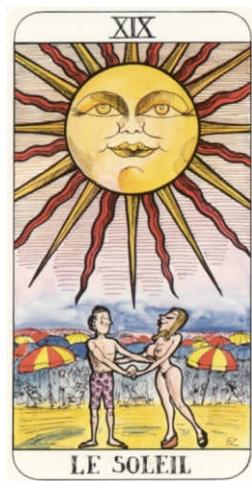


Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot

Lesson 19 : Art Medium - Watercolour



Paintings made in watercolour or other water based pigments such as acrylic, coloured ink and gouache tend to have some distinctive qualities. There are perhaps two main ways of using watercolour in illustrations such as tarot. In one method, the artist draws the images, perhaps initially in pencil, then inks in the outlines in a water resisting ink and the images are then coloured using watercolour. This is a method often taken up by relatively unskilled artists, though often used by people with great drawing skills. Here we have watercolour used only as a way of applying colour to the image, rather than exploiting its distinctive aqueous properties. Tinting rather than painting. The other method, true watercolour painting, is more skilful and requires a lot of planning to fully exploit its techniques. There are only a few tarots in which artists use true watercolour painting. Let us look at examples of these two different uses of watercolours.



The example of the first is by the Italian cartoonist and comic strip artist Giuseppe Zaccaria, better known under his pseudonym Pino Zac. This is his Cartomancie de l'an 2000. The strength of his tarot images lies in the detailed pen drawings, which he has later coloured with water based pigments. The other tarot, as yet unpublished, is the Aquatic Tarot of Andreas Schröter. Here the artist has dispensed entirely with hard outlines and painted the forms in watercolour to produce wonderfully soft and yet radiant images. These are two very different methods of using water colour in tarot illustrations. Many tarots artists have worked within

these two extremes.

Water based mediums, quickly penetrate the paper, and can follow the grain of the fibres. Water colour artists, painting portraits, still life or landscapes, choose their paper very carefully. These heavy watercolour papers have a surface of open fibres and absorb the pigment in ways which the artist can exploit and control. These papers can be worked quite wet. This paper is entirely unsuitable for inking in lines as the pen nib catches in the open fibres. Also the ink spreads and lines lose their sharpness. So artists working with line drawings which they later tincture with watercolours, usually choose a smooth surfaced board. One of the problems with this kind of board is that it is not suitable for wet working and does not always absorb the water based pigments in a consistent way. It grabs the colour and pulls it into the board. Thus it is extremely difficult to make any corrections, as the imprint of the original brushstroke remains, and resists any attempt to dissolve its shape. Thus artists, trying to create flat areas of colour, can here encounter problems. There are also problems when one tries to create a smooth colour wash up to a hard line. The more skilled artists have ways of avoiding this, but one often sees how others have struggled with the medium.

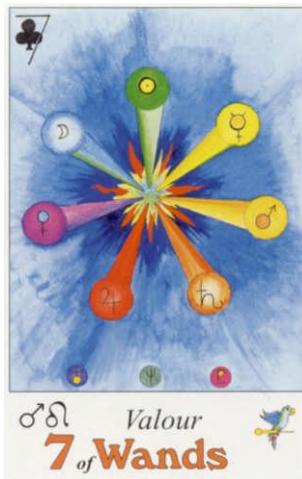
An example I have used before is from the Tarot of Ceremonial Magick. Here the artist attempted to create solid smooth areas of solid colour, but the medium in places defeated her. The too small brushstrokes remain, especially around the edges of forms. To create smoother washes with watercolour one really has to use a large and expensive brush which can hold a considerable volume of colour so that one does not have to return to the palette to reload a small brush and thus create these stabbing artifacts.



M. Guarnaccia the creator of the Nuovo Tarocco Ligure Piemontese, 1982, perhaps being aware of these problems adopts a different approach in leaving large flat areas, such as sky or other backgrounds, uncoloured. Guarnaccia avoids colouring areas with intricate borders which would not easily colour successfully. Brian Williams in his Pomo Tarot (postmodern) uses a more subtle palette and thus avoids having to create dense areas of colour. He also is happy to exploit the effect of showing brushstrokes, such as are in the sky above the two female figures in his Two of Guns. I also seem to detect in some of his cards the use of a masking agent. A good way of avoiding water based colours bleeding into an area is to paint it with a removeable latex rubber. Once the image has dried, one can rub the latex off to reveal uncolored paper.

Williams also uses good modeling with more saturated colours at the edges of the drawn forms which helps avoid brushmarks.

The flowing forms of the water based pigment on the paper often help us identify the tarot as having been painted in watercolour. Coloured pencil or crayon can produce the subtle gradations of tone that can characterizes watercolours, however, only water based pigments will show the marks of colour flows and the ghosts of brushmarks.



Parrott Tarot



Detail showing typical watercolour artifacts



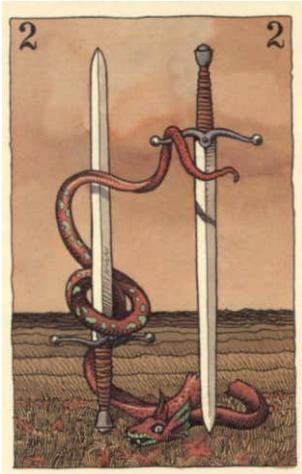
Tarot d'Or



Detail showing typical watercolour artifacts

Marks like this are diagnostic and indicative of watercolour painting. Certain pigments are grabbed by the paper more quickly than others - blues for example, especially cerulean and aquamarine, two of the more popular blue pigments.

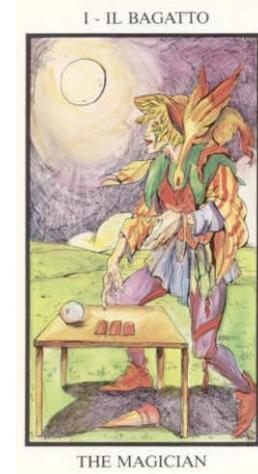
Let us now look at some examples of the two main styles of watercolour tarots - a first group which rely on strong drawing which is tinted with watercolour, and a second in which the art is conceived more purely in watercolours. Of course, artists don't necessarily like to be placed into neat categories and we find to some extent a continuum between these two methods of working.



Tarocco Favoloso (Michelangelo Gaudio and Piero Alligo), 1987. This is a strongly drawn deck which has been subtly coloured. Here one sees the controlled use of bleeding watercolour in the sky to give the effect of clouds.



The Celtic Tarot by Manuel Gonzales Miranda, Piatnik, 1990. The artwork of this deck relies on bold angular forms and triangles. The drawings are coloured in a not so subtle style. The artist seems in places to apply his watercolours rather thickly as they sometimes cover up the underlying lines. Perhaps he used gouache as well as conventional watercolours.



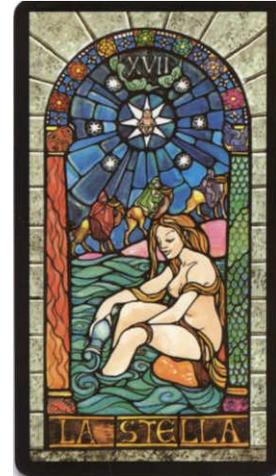
Solleone Tarot by Elisabetta Cassari, US Games, 1983. Here we have a deck that excels both in the line drawing and the watercolouring. The artist has here used very fine pen lines on a bright paper, thus leaving a lot of white areas so that the watercolour pigments are able to shine out. Thus the colour is not fighting a too dark drawing and yet the drawing provides much of the modeling of dark and light. This deck beautifully balances drawing and colouring. One has to have an actual deck of the large cards to appreciate the artwork fully.



Yoshitaka Amano Tarot, 1997.
 Amano used the same technique as Cassari, with fine pen drawings allowing plenty of white space for the watercolours to radiate. His Colouring is very subtle in places, too subtle to be appreciated in a jpeg scan, so to truly see this deck you need the actual deck or preferably the large format art book containing the Majors, Aces and Court card designs, full page.



Juni Seiza Tarot Uranai, or Zodiac Tarot of Shurei Etoile, 1988.
 A number of Japanese tarots from the late 1980's seem to show the use of airbrushing to achieve smooth gradations of tone without the artifacts usually found with watercolours. We find in this deck beautiful gradated tones, such as in the sky, mountains and sea of its Temperance card.



Il Tarocco della Vetrate, Luigi Scapini, 1997.
 Here the artist avoids any problems of watercolour artifacts by dividing his images into small areas in mimicking the leading of stained glass windows. These small regions clearly show the unevenness of a watercolour wash, but in these small areas this does not become visible to the eye, but appears as a texture or even optical effect, as if it were a result of the thick glass. Here this works extremely well.

Thus we have seen a few ways in which tarot artists have used watercolour to tinct a drawn design. Now let us consider decks which are conceived more in the medium of watercolour itself.



Tarot de Patrick Jéau, 2003. This is a rather interesting deck. The backgrounds, usually a cathedral interior, are painted freehand in watercolour while the foreground figure is drawn in pen and coloured with watercolour. Thus this deck contains both forms in one. The cathedral interiors are reused on various cards so, obviously, these two components have been graphically merged. The tarot designs are assigned to both Patrick Jéau and Sklaerenn Imbeaud (an artist in stained glass).



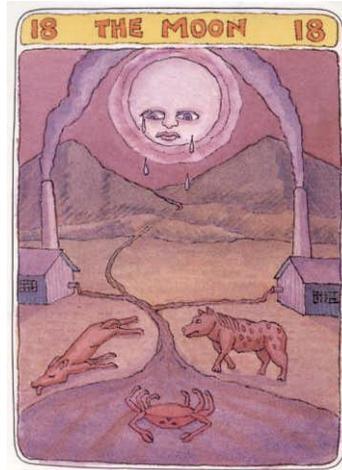
The 26 Cartes Didactiques de Tarot by Christiane Dhooge, 1995, Belgium. This set of Major arcana and four aces, is painted directly onto the paper in watercolour without any apparent under-drawing in pencil. This produces a rather lovely effect, and makes the images appear like early manuscript or miniature paintings. There is something quite special about figures drawn with the brush rather than with pencil or pen.



The Tarot and You, by Penny Lovelock, 1995. This large Majors only deck is again painted without using hard outlines. There are some traces of an underlying pencil drawing, but these construction lines are almost invisible. This artist certainly knows how to use white and to mix her colours. She avoids using pure transparent colours, but instead paints with more solid colour (these are possibly in gouache). We can see how this gives strong form to the armour of the charioteer and the modeling of the black horse. It appears as if even the white areas of her cards are painted with white and thus the whole surface of the paper has been painted.



The Aquatic Tarot painted by Andreas Schröter between 1995 and 2004 is a wonderful interpretation of the Rider Waite deck in watercolour and sadly as yet unpublished. Schröter exploits the medium to its full advantage and creates light filled almost glowing images as well as more moody pictures such as the Two of Swords. He avoids creating outlines of edges to his forms so that the images remain soft. This is recognized as among the best examples of a watercolour tarot.



William Kircher's Arcana for the New Dark Age was published as a book of oversized tear out postcards in book format in 1994. This is very similar in style to Brian Williams' Pomo Tarot also issued in 1994. Kircher's idea is to take a negative view on each of the arcana. His watercolour paintings uses the same flat tones as in the Pomo. He has achieved very subtle gradations of tones and a textured paper which shows a distinctive grain which gives his images an impeccable style. The pages, printed on a heavy stock are easily detached from the book and then treated as a rather large set of tarot cards.



The Merryday Tarot conceived and illustrated by Louisa Poole and published in 1997 is a well known and somewhat notorious deck as Louisa Poole has substantially reinterpreted many of the arcana altering their names and associated symbolism. Be that as it may, her artwork is quite astounding. The backgrounds to many of her paintings are incredibly textured, no doubt through sponging and stippling watercolour. The foreground figures are more sharply delineated and the intense colour tones suggest the use of acrylic with a medium as they stand out clearly against the background textures. Like many beautifully painted tarots, one really must have the actual printed deck to hand to appreciate its quality. A similar use of watercolour is seen in The Pagan Tarot of Robin Payne and Rosemary Lewsey, 1999.

I hope we can see in this short survey that there is much to be learnt and appreciated through looking at the art medium and the way this has been used by the artist in creating their tarot. Without even analyzing the symbolism or content of the images, merely viewing them through the perspective of the way they were made can give us a fresh insight into their artwork.

Many tarots, far too many to list, are based on ink drawings which were coloured with water based pigments and a substantial number were created by painting directly in watercolour. One could even focus a collection around watercolour tarots. This would not be a small collection, but one amounting to many hundreds of items. As an exercise, look through your own collection and identify all the watercolour decks, then see if you can divide them into groups as we have done in this lesson.