

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



Lesson 25 : Some enigmas in place of a conclusion.

Now that our study course is drawing to a close it is timely to look back and review something of what we have been looking at in these lessons. We have been able to survey the landscape of modern tarot from a number of different perspectives and become aware that there are many ways in which we can explore the riches of modern tarot. We have looked at the different purposes tarot has been used for, and at a few of the diverse themes for which certain designs were devised to reflect. We have seen that we could not ignore the many tarot designs found printed in books rather than issued as actual cards. It has been possible for us to look at some of the many Japanese, Chinese and Russian tarots with their wonderfully broad sweep of designs and creativity. There remains many more avenues of interpretation through which to view modern tarot art, and later in 2008 a second or advanced study course of twenty five lessons will be issued, following up many other strands that have only just been hinted at in this initial course. This course together with the advanced course will be the foundation for a large scale international exhibition on the artwork of modern tarot currently being planned for 2010.

Pleasant though it can be for our analytical minds to look at tarot using the perspectives introduced in this course, is this merely presenting an aesthetic exercise? Is there any other way in which this course can be of value to the student?

One of the great problems with modern tarot is the sheer volume of material. Well over two thousand decks have been printed. While a significant number of these are mass market publications available in print runs of thousands and consequently can be bought new or second-hand for £5-£20 (\$10-\$40), many others were issued in very small editions and consequently are both rare and hard to find and usually rather expensive at £75-£150 (\$150-\$300).

Many people taking this course will already have built up their own collections of decks. One of the great problems in building a collection is giving it some focus. Naturally, many people just buy decks because they like them or are somehow engaged by them. This can result in a rather strange melange, an idiosyncratic selection of material somehow significant to the individual who collected them. Often the purchase of each deck has some story associated with it. A few other people adopt the wider strategy of buying everything they find. For this one needs deep pockets. A collection of say one thousand decks probably requires an investment of

over £30,000 (\$60,000). Luckily we live in an age when the Internet has made various tools available to us, through online auctions and specialist dealers, so building a large collection is not difficult, merely time consuming and expensive. There are only a few such obsessive collectors.

Most people have to narrow their vision a little and somehow focus on a smaller collection within their financial means. This study course, hopefully, has shown us how to identify a small group of decks linked in some way, by theme, medium, region or whatever. Collecting a smaller grouping of decks over a period of some years is entirely practical and realisable. An area such as cat themed tarots is sufficiently small for even a modest investor to collect, even though there are a few items under that theme that are rather more difficult to find and expensive. For the more ambitious a larger grouping, say Japanese tarots, is considerably more challenging with well over 100 items to find, many from the 1980's and 90's, long out of print and difficult to locate. It would probably take many years to accrue a substantial Japanese collection and it would require considerable investment, certainly in excess of £5000 (\$10,000) as many of these obscure decks fetch prices well over £50 (\$100). On the other hand decks given away free with magazines, are usually inexpensive and yet almost no one is collecting these. Consequently, one can build a good specialist collection of this material for a more modest outlay, though items can be very difficult to find in good condition. Self-published tarots are another group one might consider. Some of these are extremely expensive, and yet others are available at ludicrously low prices. One finds one can sometimes buy these amazing works of art produced in very small editions, often for only a few pounds or dollars. As the artist/producer does not make any money out of selling these, they rapidly lose enthusiasm and give up production, and thus one ends up with a collection of 22 or 78 original pieces of art of which only ten or twenty examples exist. Collecting this material is risky but very rewarding, as one is dealing directly with the originating artist.

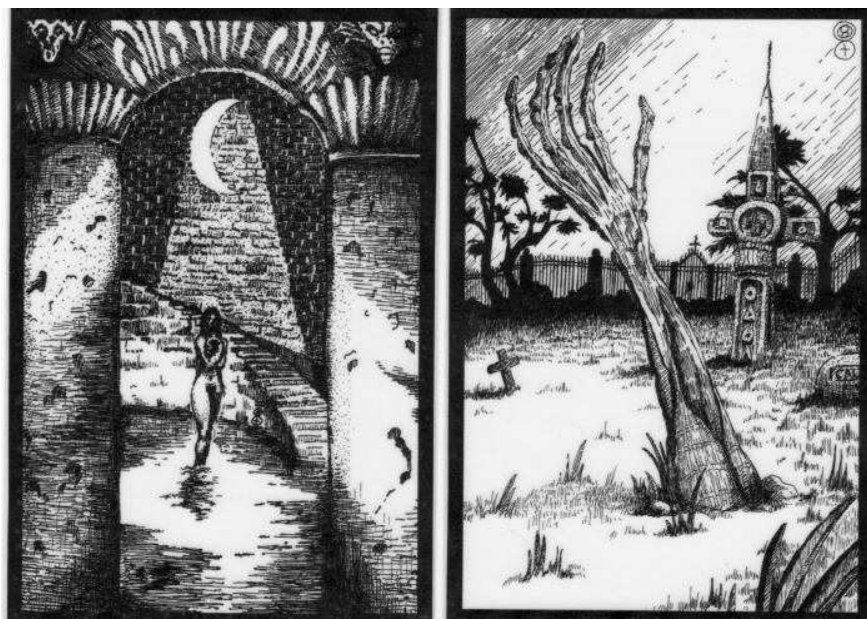
This course presents a view that modern tarot art documents social history. Sadly almost all art historians dismiss tarot as trivial and will just not engage with it at all. Libraries and museums also take a negative view on tarot, labelling it as ephemera, and thus on the same level as printed handouts and posters. So no institutions seem to collect tarot. Indeed, it is difficult to gift them to a library, as I found out recently when trying to make provision in my Will for my own collection, in that I could find no local major library willing to receive them as a beneficiary of my estate. Thus tarot remains firmly in the hand of the amateur collector. Modern tarot art is underappreciated and to most cultural historians totally invisible. This present study course is an attempt to reassess tarot art and recontextualise it as a key document of modern social history. In modern tarot we see, as through a lens or mirror, aspects of our society held up for us to view. The tight structure of the imagery requires the tarot artist to find some new angle on the symbolism and thus they often endue or fold into the work, their views on things happening in their society, sometimes entirely consciously but in other cases just absorbing, by osmosis, aspects of what is going on around them. Tarot art thus often reflects back to us the societal currents, the way we live, the culture and politics of our modern age. Almost no cultural historians have recognised tarot as such a resource. Perhaps, in time, this study course and the proposed exhibition will set this matter right, so that people can see what a treasure house modern tarot is.

We will conclude this first course with a few ‘lollipops’, ‘weirdos’ or otherwise interesting items, that are almost beyond categorisation. These do not easily fit into categories yet are a part of the richness that is tarot art.

Among the wonderfully creative and enigmatic designs is Julia Turk’s Navigators Tarot of the Mystic Sea. This mass market tarot bravely issued by U.S. Games Systems is quite challenging in its strange use of symbols.



John Glock’s Eternal Dream Tarot is also enigmatic and dispenses with titles or numbers for the cards. Through his beautiful pen drawings he explores tarot imagery from new perspectives often finding deliciously original ways of representing the standard tarot Major Arcana for us.



Penny Chesney's Globalight Angelic Tarot also finds new ways for imaging the arcana to us. She views her creative process as one of channelling, receiving inspiration directly from her subconscious or the Celestine, or Angelic Host themselves. However she chooses to see her source of ideas, her imagery is powerful and original. She incorporates a number of bird and animal forms into each design. The deck is printed in strong, saturated and intense colours.



The Fool is so different from the conventional image, with him emerging from an egg, though perched precariously on the edge of a cliff. Below a crow pushes its beak through a crowned snake seizing its own tail and forming a circle. This is the ouroboros familiar from alchemy. Each image is set in a shield-like form and surrounded by a decorative border.



The Tarot Divinatoire de l'Etoile Rana by Régine Faudot is yet another example, we can turn to, of creative reworking of the imagery. The artist suggests that she came upon this almost by accident when making other drawings. Someone suggested that they could well form a tarot and Faudot set to work and in no time at all had produced these 22 cards of the Star Rana. Rana is the common name for Delta Eridani, a 3.54 magnitude giant star in the

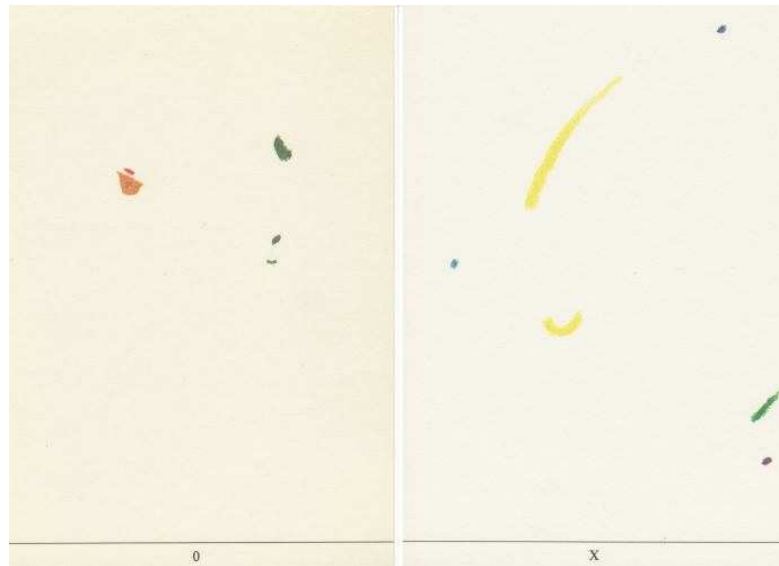
constellation of Eridanus (the River), in the immediate stellar neighbourhood of the Sun, but whether this has anything to do with Régine Faudot's concept for her deck seems unanswerable. Her Magician dispenses entirely with his table and magical implements and instead sits in the familiar yoga posture breathing fire onto his left hand while his right arm is metamorphosing into a bush or tree. Death quotes the image of Salvador Dali's famous 'Saint John of the Cross' painting, while below, the cloaked skeleton of death sees her living form reflected in a pool of water, a wonderfully enigmatic image.

L'Oeil de Myrddin ou Tarot des Princes is a weird French tarot of 78 cards by Philippe Rouchier and Francis Simard. It is dedicated to Steve Hackett, the guitarist of the group Genesis, whose solo album, *Voyage of the Acolyte* of 1975, had its compositions based on tarot imagery. The booklet accompanying the deck is suitably obscure and does not really open us much into the nature of the enigmatic designs. Instead it seems more like a booklet of riddles.



The paintings for this tarot image the forms to us in high relief, like carved soapstone or even wood. The artist has thus achieved delightful kind of faux bas-relief. His imagery is enigmatic and often minimalistic. Thus the Fool only shows a boulder falling from a cliff over the sea, presumably dislodged by the Fool walking along the sea cliffs. The Moon present a rather morose and self absorbed bird by a pool with the moon shining above.

The Energetic Tarot of Wilfried Teschler produced in 1986, remains stubbornly cryptic. Teschler writes “This Energetic Tarot does not show any pictures in the usual sense. By the order of the colors and forms, an energy field, that represents the archetype presented through the tarot energetically in its first recognizable form, was created on the individual cards”. Here we have presumably, the essence of tarot, presented to us in a few dabs and blotches of crayon colour on a white background. The term ‘minimalist’ hardly does justice to these. Damien Hirst’s dot pictures are rich in form compared to these most challenging of tarot images. Even card X, presumably corresponding to the Wheel of Fortune though labelled ‘Neutrality’, is devoid of any circular reference. Perhaps here tarot art has gone to its extreme point of abstraction, and to some eyes doubtless exceeded it. Teschler presents his ideas on his tarot eloquently in a six page booklet, though he keeps to high principles rather than giving any detail as to how his pattern of blotches reflects a tarot arcanum. This is one deck most people will pass over in silence.



Having reached this extreme outpost of tarot art we bring this foundation course to an end. We will be following up many more threads in the next course, looking at oil painted tarots, tarots from South America, Poland and other countries and regions, modern art Tarocchi, prolific tarot artists, collage tarots, Kabbalistic themed decks, self-published tarots, pastiche decks, magazine tarots and many other perspectives. Despite the twenty five lessons over 200 plus pages of this course there remain so many more themes to address. Modern tarot art never ceases to astound and surprise and there are vast areas left still to explore.