

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



Lesson 16 : Some further perspectives to consider.

So far we have tried to grasp the artwork of tarot from a number of different viewpoints. We examined ways of looking at tarot decks in terms of the perceived purpose or intention of their creators, and then we saw how decks could be grouped together according to the particular theme of the artwork. We also looked at tarot designs that only appeared in books and not as printed decks, and we turned that idea around and looked at tarots which were themselves based on books.

There are thousands of tarot designs. There must be well over two thousand actually printed, with many more designs created that did not find a publisher. In order to have some grasp of these Tarots it is important to locate common features or ways of categorizing the designs and artwork, however, there is no single way of doing this. An interesting attempt was made in the book *Tarot and other Meditation Decks* by Emily E. Auger. Here she presented some abstract categorizations into Annotative Types One to Three, and Discursive Types One to Three. For me this attempt failed as I found I could not realistically use such abstract categories, but the book remains a delight, despite this failed categorization, as this art historian has many insights that enable us to place tarot decks in a particular context.

Let us now consider a few other perspectives we can take on Tarot.

Regional Tarot

We can attempt to look at Tarots from a particular country as having sufficient similarities of style that we can group them together in a coherent way. This immediately fails when we consider the output from the USA which is so diverse that one fails to find any common features, but in the case of, say, South Korea, the output is small but coherent in style. Italy, the birthplace of Tarot, has a massive output in the modern period, but these works perhaps reflect the underlying historical traditions of Tarot in Italy and it can be instructive to see these deck designs as a



totality, even though the style of the artwork is very diverse. Italy, in particular, continues the tradition of Art Tarot, often as Majors only decks, which are really designed to be viewed primarily as art works rather than as divination cards. In France, tarot is still a popular card game and there are many Jeu de Tarot issued. These card game decks have also influenced designers of other French decks. Russian tarot fall into two groups, those which reprint, often without permission, European or American deck designs and increasingly we see a number of original tarots emerging there. It is also very instructive to look at Russian tarots alongside the former Eastern Block countries such as Poland (which itself has a respectable base of tarot designs).

Japanese artists took up tarot relatively early and a large number of decks were issued from the 1990's onward. I have about sixty decks and there remain many more than this to collect. It is interesting to see how Japanese tarot initially holds close to the established Western pattern, but later in the 1990's tarot designs emerge that reflect aspects of modern Japanese society, such as the influences of anime. Japanese tarot are often issued as major only decks and some are intended perhaps more as artworks for collectors rather than for necessarily for divination, though they usually incorporate a book with detailed instructions on how to use them in this way. The number of Taiwanese decks has increased greatly in recent years. Many of these seem to use tarot imagery as a vehicle for promoting anime characters or computer game scenarios. Regrettably, there has begun to emerge recently cards named 'tarot' which are merely collectors or trading cards, with a set of 78 cards with no discernable tarot structure. It is disappointing to buy a deck which is essentially a promotion for a TV cartoon show merely displaying the characters in scenes from various episodes with no attempt to link these to tarot imagery, however, there remains a considerable group of interesting conventional Tarots designed in Taiwan and this is a fascinating group to study.

We could also look at the smaller output of Australian tarots as a group. These do not cohere stylistically but have refreshing originality of approach. South American tarots often rework tarot imagery within the context of their own cultures. A similar thing could be said for British tarot which has been especially influenced by the Celtic mystical theme from the 1980's onwards, though there are a few other British decks unconnected with this and more universal in approach. It makes an interesting study.

The different art media

It will also be instructive to look at tarot decks and designs through the medium in which it

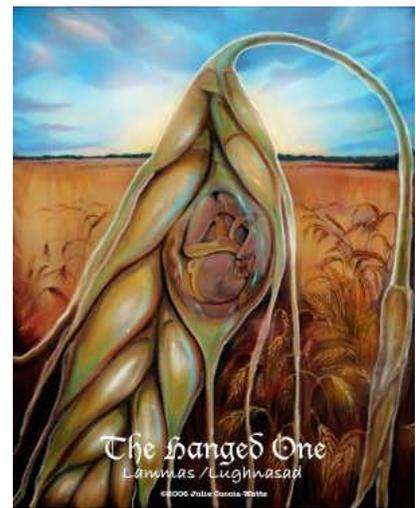


was created. Perhaps by far the greatest number of modern period tarots have been produced by line drawings in pencil or pen, which were then coloured, often by watercolour or by block graphic colour applied by hand or by computer graphics. There are too many tarots created in this way for us to list. The use of line drawing to some extent keeps the artwork stylistically anchored to the early woodcut and engraved tarots of an earlier age. A good example of this is seen in Robert Place's work with his Alchemical, Tarot of the Saints and Angels Tarot. His Buddha mimics Buddhist block prints. There are pure watercolour tarots, in which the paint flows into forms without the restriction of the enclosing line. The Aquatic tarot is perhaps one of the best

examples of this. Of course, acrylic paints can be used in an aqueous way as well as conventional gum-based watercolours. The essence perhaps of this form is the absence of hard edges and with the flowing forms invoking a mystical atmosphere. A similar effect can be achieved using coloured pencils or crayons, diffusing and blending colour without containing it within hard forms.



Ernest Solari uses this in some of his work, though he often adopts the pointillist style using small dots or dabs of colour to build up his forms. Tarot painted using oils or acrylic, on board or canvas, form a considerable group. Like modern painting in general these can be extremely detailed photorealistic works or more impressionist in style. Among the former, say, are the precise surrealism of the Fergus Hall tarot, Marie-Claude Purro's work, Julie Cuccia-Watts incredible output or H. R. Giger's detailed paintings later used in his tarot.





The more impressionistic works are such as the Andar tarot of Darlaine Foley, De Freehands or the Elsa Dax tarot. There is, of course, a continuum of styles found in painted tarots. If you have a reasonably sized collection, it could be a useful exercise to try and group painted tarots into styles and see just how the individual artist worked with their materials.



There are tarots created in high art media such as engravings, woodcuts and serigraphy, and even a few created in tapestry. Here are examples of the Viviani (engravings), Storm

(woodcuts), St Phalle (serigraphs/screen prints) and Ingerid Blakstad's embroidered tapestry.



Collage tarots first emerged in the 1960's with the Martin Sharp designs included with the London *Oz* magazine issue 4. Collage can be very powerful but in the wrong hands can be rather disappointing. There are some incredibly beautiful and engaging tarots made using collage.

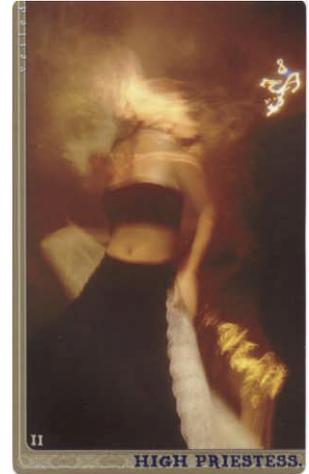


We think of the considerable output of Arnell Ando, the *Mansions of the Moon* and *Sheba's Tarot* by Zadok (Dennis Hogue), and the wonderfully professional productions of the Magic Realist Press in Prague. Collage is of course a medium which can also be used by people with limited artistic skills as they can create images that they can envisage and yet would be incapable of drawing or painting. Some people also lack sufficient aesthetic sense to make a meaningful deck and then we find instead clichéd images that make the work tired and tedious.



Early collage tarots used photographs or images from books and magazines, but with the development of fast personal computers

and scanners in the 1990's we have seen a growth of computer assisted collage. Some artists extend this further by using the features of computer graphics programs like Photoshop or dedicated painting programs to filter, modify, distort and restructure images by adding layer upon layer to the initial conception. Some of the resulting decks are truly amazing, such as the Alchemical Wedding tarot or Shelly Corbett's Abyssal Tarot. There are also a number of pure photographic decks, in some of which people are posed, often in costume, to create the tarot composition, while other photographic tarots are more impressionistic.



We will look at representatives of some of these tarot art media later in the course. As ever, tarot artists are incredibly creative, and use all sorts of media. The Chateau at Avenieres in France even has tarot murals in the form of large mosaics. In the Autumn of 2006 we saw the appearance of two tarots based on drawings on biscuits, by an Italian artist!

Individual tarot artists

There are a small group of artists who have produced a number of tarots, indeed who seem to have devoted a major part of their creative output to tarot. We immediately think of the Italians such as Amerigo Folchi, Osvaldo Menegazzi, Luigi Scapini and the artists who have worked with the publisher Lo Scarabeo, but there are a number of artists who have produced multiple tarot decks, such as the collagist Arnell Ando, Shandra McNeill, Brian Williams, F.J. Campos among many others. Later, in part two of the course, we will find space to devote some lessons to individual artist's output.

Most tarot creators give their decks a title that reflects some idea or concept that contributed to the design, however peripheral or obscure this might be. Thus we have a continuum from the simply descriptive names such as Tarot des Chats or Arthurian, through to the more abstruse and recondite such as Tarocchi Tharbon, l'Oeil de Lotus, the Three Rabbits or the Corneal Edema.

Another group of tarot decks are named after their creator. We immediately call to mind such as the Gill Tarot, Manzoni, Moure, Roberto Polloni, Samantha's Tarot and many many more. It is interesting to try and see why the artist has chosen to name their creation with some descriptive or other title, and in other cases to give their own name to the deck. How a Tarot is named can so orient the viewer, by loading them with perceptions, that they can come to see

this Tarot in a certain way. The Cornish Tarot, the Templar Tarot and the Karma Tarot (just to take a few examples) do not necessarily inform us on Cornwall, the Knights Templar or on karma, which is not to disparage them at all as artworks. It is interesting to try and see why a tarot is given the name it has, and how that name can make us take a view on the art presented in the deck.

I wanted to present in this lesson just a few more ways in which we can look at the complex mass of tarot designs and try to find some common features. There would appear to be no simple, monolithic, way of categorizing and grouping tarot decks, instead, faced with the explosion of creative thinking and re-envisioning that underlies modern Tarot, we have to apply whole batteries of critical tools in order to gain some overview of the material. This course, in a sense, remains centred in such phenomenological approaches, but keeps away from making rigid categories. One of the great delights of Tarot is its quixotic nature. Just when you think you see a clear pattern linking some tarot designs, another one turns up that knocks down your abstract theory.