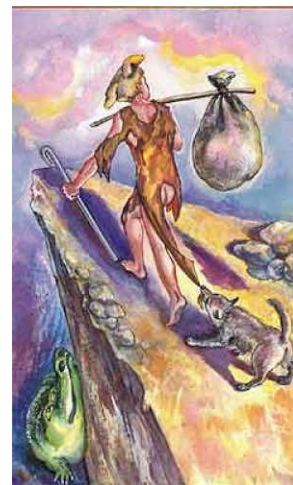
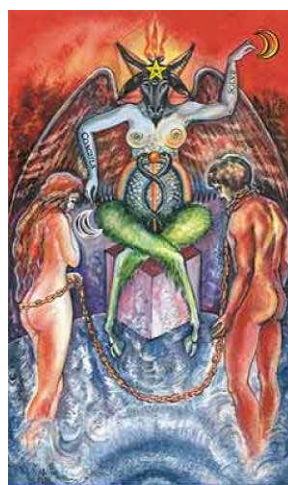


Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot

Lesson 21 : Regional tarots - Russian

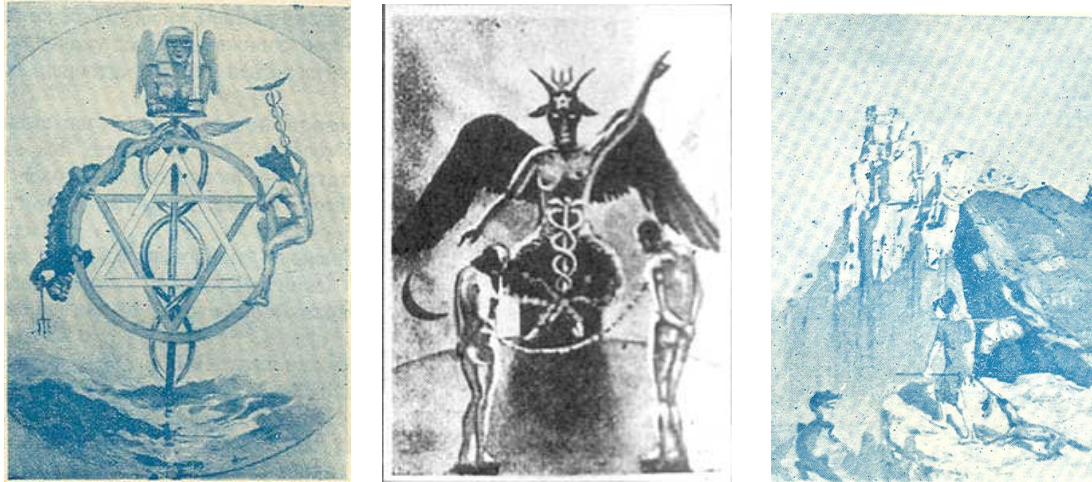


Tarot in Russia appears in the early decades of the 20th century, but is entirely eclipsed by the emergence of Communism in 1918 and only re-emerges after its fall in the early 1990's. Before the Communist period, Russian intellectual culture had a long history of interest in mysticism, occult, philosophical and theosophical ideas. The founder of Theosophy (a powerful influence on A. E. Waite) was the Russian émigré Madame Blavatsky, and a number of other Russians were drawn to such ideas. There were active tarot study groups in Russia in the first decades of the 20th century. To a great extent these focused around Gregory Ossipovitch Mebes, who created a now famous study course on tarot which was later translated, reworked and issued by Mouni Sadhu as his own work in *The Tarot - A Contemporary Course of The Quintessence of Hermetic Occultism*, 1962. Mouni Sadhu was the pseudonym of the Pole Mieczyslaw Sudowski. Mebes does not seem to have created an actual deck but the descriptions in his book were sufficiently clear for the Russian publisher Aenigma to create a deck following the indications. This is the Cabbalistic Tarot G.O.M. of 2003. Though painted in watercolours by a modern graphic artist, the imagery reflects the early 20th century tarot ideas of G. O. Mebes. We clearly see how the 'Wheel of Fortune' and the 'Devil' cards derive from magical figures from works of Eliphas Levi.



Mebes' study course was originally published in 1912 in Russian as part of 'An Encyclopedic Course of Occultism'. This was later republished in Shanghai in 1937 and this

book included some tarot designs seemingly by the well known Russian artist Vasily Nikolaevich Masjutin (1884-1955). We see how the modern artist copied from and reworked these lithographic illustrations by Masjutin.



Masjutin had earlier produced an art tarot, in which he drew more on the cultural ideas of the time, with art deco and neo-Egyptian imagery. This was apparently produced as a series of coloured lithographs for an exhibition, but the location of these is presently unknown. This must be the first genuinely art tarot to have been produced.



With the fall of Soviet Union Communism in 1991, aspects of Russian culture which had been held back and suppressed began to emerge again. The new freedom to publish led some pioneers to print up some tarot decks. Many of these tarots were pirate copies of standard Western tarots but with Russian titles, though some may be authorized Russian versions. Here is a list of just some of these tarots.

1999 Mythological Tarot, (The Mythic Tarot Tricia Newell 1986)
 1999 Tarot of Spiritual Evolution - Key of Hermes (Rider-Waite with alternative cards)
 1999 Lovers Tarot (Burstion)
 2000 Tarot of Aquarius's era (Rohrig Tarot)
 2000 Duerer Tarot (described as designed by Alexey Gavriletz but really copy of the Italian deck by Giacinto Gaudenzi of 1990.)
 2000 Universal Tarot (reprint of Connolly's Universal Tarot)
 2000 The Cosmic Tribe Tarot (Stevee Postman)
 2001 Gregori Tarot (described as designed by G. Kravchenko but really a copy of the images from the Arcus Arcanum, 1988, here set in designed borders with Russian titles.)
 2001 Tarot of the Gold Dawn - Tabitha Cicero
 2001 Tarot of A. E. Waite
 2001 Tarot of Marseilles (reprint of Grimaud 1930 edition)
 2001 Tavaglione's Stairs of Gold Tarot
 2001 Tarot of Transformations (Shapeshifter Tarot, 1998)
 2001 Tarot of Third Millenium (Rohrig Tarot)
 2002 Round tarot of Woman Authority (Motherpeace Round Tarot)
 2002 Tarot of ancient wisdom (Tarot of the Old Path)
 2003 Osho Zen Tarot
 2003 Manara Tarot

Russians are not mere imitators of Western ideas and as soon as it became possible for artists in Russia to have their images freely published, they produced a number of original designs. Here is a short and not exhaustive list of some original tarots produced in Russia from the early 1990's.

1992 Unisam (Moscow) Tarot - G. Eliseev
 1993 Russian Tarot
 1993 Tarot 93 (L. Korazbei)
 1998 Tarot of Aquarius's era - M. Bolgarchuk
 1999 Transcendental Tarot - Key of Hermes
 1999 Egyptian Tarot
 1999 Mysterious Tarot of Egypt
 2000 Union Chernobil Tarot
 2000 Vedic Tarot
 2000 Magic Tarot - Aleksey Kluev
 2001 Soliter Tarot
 2001 Tarot of Fortune - Klim Li
 2002 Tarot of Nostradamus's dreams - Zakjan Gajane, V. Sklyarova
 2002 Gold Tarot of Doctor Paracels - V. Sklyarova
 2002 Marseilles style Tarot
 2002 Tarot of Love
 2002 Holy Tarot of Tot - V.M. Khorkov
 2003 Cabbalistic Tarot G.O.M.
 2003 Rocambole Tarot
 2004 Tarot of Shadows
 2004 Apollo Tarot
 2004 Fairy Tale Tarot
 2006 Tarot Astar
 2006 Biblical Tarot

Among the earliest of these must be the deck created in coloured woodblock style by G. Eliseev. This majors only deck obviously draws on the Tarot of Marseilles and also the Rider-Waite deck, but it is a rather fine and fresh reworking of the standard tarot imagery.



The Russian Tarot - Magic fortune telling and meditation tarot cards, was issued in 1993. This is a full 78 card deck. The pip cards are not emblematic. The imagery for this deck draws to some extent from the Wirth and Mebes tarots and the artwork consists of wonderfully detailed oil or acrylic paintings by Victor Bakhtin. The Court cards portray the King, Queen, Knight and Page, but in a strange variety of costume styles, from Tudor, Eighteenth Century court dress, Symbolist Celtic and Renaissance Italian clothing. This is a rather fine tarot by this accomplished artist well known for illustrating numerous Russian books. He seems to have relocated in 1994 to the USA where he produces wonderfully detailed wildlife art.



In 2000, the Vedic (Vedicheskoe) Tarot, an inventive 78 card deck was published. The artwork was done in fine line, possibly created in a computer drawing program, but it could also have been pen drawn. These appear to have been coloured using a computer graphics program, with the familiar solid colours and smooth gradation effects. The pip cards closely follow the Rider-Waite emblems, while the Majors draw more from the Wirth and Mebes images, with, for example, the crocodile (here depicted more as a dragon) on the Fool card. I am not sure to what the title 'Vedic' here refers. This word usually indicates the early period and writings of Hinduism in Sanskrit, but we find no Indian imagery here. This tarot is entirely Western and conventionally derived from the Rider-Waite and Wirth imagery. Though the artwork by Tatyana Lodko and S. Levchenko is not especially original, the way in which it has been created with its choice of bright clear colours, has produced a very attractive deck. This artwork style seems to have been taken up in Vera Sklyarova's Doctor Paracelsus Tarot of 2003.



Vedic Tarot



Doctor Paracelsus Tarot (Taro Doktora Paratsels)

This tarot has a wonderful clarity of form and colour. I have not been able to identify the artist but the deck is issued with a book by the prolific writer Vera Sklyarova. The connection to the 16th century Swiss alchemist and physician Paracelsus is not obvious from the artwork, but perhaps this is explained in the accompanying book. The deck includes eight extra cards, seven of which are depictions of the lotuses of the chakras which to modern esoteric thought are apparently located in the human body along the spine. The eighth card shows a rather riotous scene in a medieval tavern, with figures seated around a table drinking, eating, gambling and fighting.

Another deck using a 16th century figure as inspiration, is the Tarot of Nostradamus' Dreams issued in 2002. These appear to be acrylic paintings with most of the forms established in line drawings. The colours are especially luminous and well harmonized.



The imagery is in places close to conventional tarot, such as the Fool, but we have some really interesting interpretations, such as the empty throne of the Emperor. Some of the Majors are renamed, though the symbolism coheres for the most part with the usual tarot imagery.

0	The Madman	XI	The Lion
I	Solomon on the Tripod	XII	The Blind Sphynx
II	Celestial Omens	XIII	The Death
III	Venus	XIV	Stairs to the Temple
IV	The Throne and the Sceptre	XV	The Number of the Beast
V	The Priest	XVI	The Tower
VI	The Rose and the Magpie	XVII	The Star
VII	The Ship	XVIII	The Moon
VIII	The Scales	XIX	The Fire
IX	The Monk in the Desert	XX	The [Last] Judgement
X	The Wheel	XXI	The Key

The Pip cards use various symbols to represent the number. Thus the five of Pentacles has five locusts. I cannot say how much the imagery of this deck derives from a reading of Nostradamus' prophetic dream-like poems *The Centuries*, but it certainly is an original reworking of the tarot. Unfortunately I am unable to read the accompanying book in Russian by Vera Sklyarova which no doubt explains the symbolism. The deck includes an extra card (the 'Blank Card') with an Ankh symbol. The artist is Gayane Zakian.

In 2001 the Tarot of Fortune, by the St Petersburg artist Klim Li, was published. It must have sold well as it was reprinted a year later with slightly different box and card backs. This deck uses a theme often used in tarot, that of circus clowns, jugglers, harlequins and Commedia dell'Arte imagery. Li creates fine line pen drawings which he colours with pastels. Many of the images are gently erotic, but always fun. The Pips show the relevant number but with a human figure or figures dancing or posturing. Li has a subtle sense of humour which he works into these depictions. The pastel colouring is intense in places, where he used deep reds and blues, but also soft thin veils of colour to model the human bodies. He has created a wonderfully original tarot.



Vera Sklyarova seems to have devoted most of the past decade to tarot and in 2004 her Tarot of Shadows was published. Similar perhaps in artwork style to the Tarot of Fortune with fine pen drawings, here coloured with watercolour. This deck seems to present itself as a dark magical deck full of demons, but it is really infused with the same sort of humour we find in the Klim Li's art. The cards are renamed with demonic or devil names.

- 0 Antichrist (Fool)
- I Satan (Magician)
- II Lilith (High Priestess)
- III Hecate (Empress)
- IV Lucifer (Emperor)
- V Ahriman (Hierophant)

However, though this deck purports to be exploring the dark or shadow side of reality, the images are charming and not without wit.

The Fool as jester in cap and bells is an unlikely Antichrist. The Magician as Satan is appropriately a falling dark angel. The High Priestess, Lilith, is a bat winged goth, under a dark Moon, but here she is set in a scene of maternal domesticity, tending her rather chubby and well looked after child. In card XV, The Devil, Asmodeus is making a pact with Faust. The Minor arcana do not appear to be divided into suits but continue a similar retinue of demonic forms.

Though there are as yet only a few dozen decks by Russian artists, they are truly original and explore tarot in a creative way. As a final example of the creativity that has been recently unleashed in Russia we can look at the Tarot of Sergey de Rocambole and Anna Nikolayeva. Sergey de Rocambole lives in St Petersburg and is immersed in art and esoteric systems. He especially focuses on the idea of the labyrinth. In 1993 he set up a art group called Dragon's Springs. He later worked with Anna Nikolayeva on a tarot for this group, and it was eventually published in 2003. The artwork is neo-Mayan abstract computer graphics, but still quintessentially tarot. De Rocambole requires all sorts of complex underlying philosophies to give form to his work, and seems to need to retreat into a kind of exercise in non-communication "Labyrinth, as a sign of archaic meta-code, as a module-hieroglyph of initial hypertext, joins together a message of ancient tradition and tendencies of contemporary art with the possibility and desire to overcome the limits of binary axiomatic language with all its consequences for a person." The book that accompanies the deck has many complex cosmological, kabbalistical theories, and ideas from Gurdjieff (a Greek-Armenian mystic and spiritual teacher of the early 20th century who spent some time in Russia). De Rocambole obviously delights in this abstruse, esoteric, obscure and elevated theory, but the tarot deck created through his inspiration by Anna Nikolayeva is wonderfully straightforward, though translated into abstract geometric forms. She embeds this within Mayan symbolism and the result is rather impressive. Here is the Magician, the High Priestess and the Hanged Man.

