

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

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## Lesson 1 : The orientation of this course

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Tarot is an amazing phenomenon, a delightful expression of the human imagination, that is, sadly and inexplicably, almost totally unappreciated by scholars and the art world. The original tarot images were created in the mid 15th century and so engaged the Western mind, which delights in such imagery, that it survived the centuries. Today there are probably at least two thousand tarot designs in existence. I, myself, have been able to collect over a thousand tarot decks, and I am aware of the many gaps in my collection. Tarot seems to have grown out of the European emblem tradition, and its set of enigmatic images so enraptured the European mind that its compact emblem forms have been maintained intact for over 550 years. Although different designers and artists have reworked these images in their own individual style and within their own culture, the symbolism of the twenty two trumps, the court cards and the pips, coheres and remains intact over these five centuries.

This study course will explore the marvels of modern tarot designs. We will not be limited by a purely historical survey (though the history can be interesting), but instead go on a journey of exploration, looking at modern tarot in all sorts of ways and different perspectives. Amongst other things, we will see how some creators of tarot brought influences and cultural colour from their own backgrounds into their designs, how some sought to expand the parameters of tarot with original ideas, how other tarots were designed for specific purposes, while others produced truly remarkable images that stand in their own right as artworks.

For about the first four centuries of its existence, tarot remained relatively static. This game of cards was expressed in a number of different but closely related designs. In the late 18th century a rather imaginative French writer presented tarot as a secret book of instruction of ancient Egyptian origin. This so engaged and excited the imagination of some 19th century writers, that they extended this thesis and they invented connections with Jewish kabbalah, through associating the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet with the 22 trumps, which from then on became labeled as 'arcana', that is images bearing a hidden meaning. All this was mere fiction and invention, but it did give a spur to a re-engagement with the tarot, and there arose out of this ferment of esotericism in the mid and late 19th century, fresh designs that are the basis of many tarot decks today. For example the Wegener-Falconnier Egyptian tarot of 1896, the Wirth designs of 1889 and the hidden tarot of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (which the members had to recreate as part of their inner work in this influential magical order). These and other tarot designs then set the background for the emergence of new

revitalized tarot imagery in the 20th century. We will, in time, take a detailed look at this in some of the later lessons in this course, but it will be best at the outset merely to get a general sense of the way in which tarot evolved in the modern era.

In the early twentieth century the amazingly influential Rider-Waite tarot deck appeared and shaped the way in which tarot was to develop. A number of decks were designed during the first half of the 20th century and we will look at these in on some detail, but we had only a handful of new designs in this fifty year period, until in the 1960's a vital new creative spirit seemed to flow into tarot. As soon as a few of these early modern designs appeared, people seemed to be so taken with this emerging new form that they turned to working with tarot imagery themselves and we can see an explosion of tarot designs in the 1970's and 80's which still continues unabated today. Dozens of new tarots are now published every year.

Tarot became multicultural and open to different and mutually inconsistent interpretations, so that the imagery of one deck would not necessarily cohere with and often contradicted that on another. The amazing strength of tarot seems to lie in the relatively tight structure of its twenty two arcana. Though these emblematic images could be interpreted by tarot designers and artists in different ways, the symbolic components had a strength of form which imposed a structure on anyone designing a tarot, and this very restriction somehow kept the tarot tradition coherent, so that one could read the emblematic forms of the Fool, Magician, Priestess etc., clearly out of the different tarot designs. Later in the twentieth century, the so-called 'oracle decks' appeared. In these more freely structured designs, the authors threw off the restrictions of the tarot structure and devised their own structure along with their imagery. In this course, we will not (except for a few exceptions) be dealing with the oracle decks, but entirely focus on designs with a clear tarot structure.

The tarot structure emerged early in its history. This is not the place to argue the different views or discuss which design came first or established the pattern, but it is clear that a pattern emerged and this is still with us today in the two thousand or so tarot designs in existence. We have the twenty two trumps, and in the full pack, four court cards and ten pip cards in four suits, making  $14 \times 4 = 54$  in the minor arcana, and thus seventy eight cards in all. Many of our contemporary tarot designers have focused solely on the twenty two trumps and there are many tarots which only depict these. The decks intended more for cartomancy or tarot readings, will have a full set of seventy eight cards. Usually, but not always, the designer works some special imagery into the design of the court and ace cards, but in the case of the 'pip' or number cards these are often simple arrays of swords, wands, cups or pentacles (or whatever the designer chooses to represent these four suits) like to the pips on conventional playing cards. Other designers go much further and provide a rich and complex imagery for each of the pip cards. We will be examining all these things in detail in some of the lessons that follow.

So this course will focus entirely on tarot designs which respect the conventional tarot structure, even though (as many creative artists tend to do) they may push against these boundaries and try and extend them. We have been using the term 'design' rather than tarot 'pack' or 'deck' as not all published tarots were produced as actual cards. There are many interesting tarots which were published as illustrations in books, rather than being issued in the form of actual printed cards. In the last few years there are also a growing number of tarots

which have been published only as images on web sites. It is important to include some of these in our survey. There are also an unknown number of tarot designs which exist merely in the form of the original artwork, which have never been published. Some of these unique items appear in Stuart Kaplan's volumes of his *Encyclopedia of Tarot* (1978 -2005). For this course we will focus more on tarots which were published as decks, printed books, and web images, and thus could enter into the public domain where they could influence and affect other tarot designers.

So our course on tarot will be primarily experiential, and will desist from too much focus on history. It will also not deal with the complexities of the esoteric interpretation of symbolism. There are so many competing esoteric groups wanting to impose and stamp their individual views on tarot imagery, so it seems pointless entering into this sea of confusion. Rather we will try to let an individual tarot design speak for itself and perhaps provide some context within which we can view it. At times it may seem as if we have gone on a rather confusing and disjointed journey, jumping from one tarot to another, but as the course proceeds you should find that you are beginning to develop an appreciation for the ways in which individual tarots express themselves. The course is not a haphazard journey but one designed to open up the delights of modern tarot to you.

There will be a great amount of imagery for you to look at. For a number of reasons it is impossible to show all the card images of each tarot in the lessons. All modern tarot designs are copyright, and for legal reasons one cannot blithely scan and freely distribute the artwork that people have laboured over, sometimes for years. Instead some examples can be shown in the low resolution of the computer screen under the fair use of copyright material. At the end of the lesson links will be provided to web sites where one can see more of the cards in the deck. In reality, one can really only study tarot imagery by buying the actual cards or books, and I would urge people to do this. I could never have created this course if I had not been able to collect all the decks and been able to handle them and look at the detailed printed image. The imagery of a jpeg scan is usually far too low for one to be able to appreciate the amazing artwork. A example of this can be seen with the *Bilder Zum Tarot* of Helmut Wonschick created in 1984, which are originally large pen drawings with fine lines reduced onto 4 by 2.2 inch (10 by 60mm) images on card.



We can see how the standard scan of the image, gives merely a smeary, almost unreadable impression of the card design, whereas a 600 dpi scan of part of the image shows the details almost as they are printed. Here we have the image of the Tower and we see here in the detailed image how Wonschick has depicted the falling human figure as fractured, with his top half white and bottom half shaded. Details like this are easily missed when one only has access to poor quality scans.

To truly appreciate tarot art one must surely buy tarot cards and have them as real objects and not think one can get by with scans taken off the internet. It is not that expensive to collect tarot. Many 1980's and later tarots can be bought secondhand for under \$20. Of course, the rarer tarots, some of the earlier ones, and those that are totally desirable and now out of print, fetch high prices and can cost over \$300. If you are prepared to invest such a sum then you can come to own a series of 22 rare artworks, and sometimes you just have to pay such prices to have such beautiful objects ready to hand. Many of these tarots were made in small editions, some as small as 20 copies, so they do have a collectable value as well as an artistic one. Collecting tarot can be an investment opportunity and this has pushed up prices considerably recently as interest grows in this neglected artwork. I have provided some links to online shops that specialize in tarot cards, as an appendix to this first lesson.

As I indicated earlier, I could not have constructed this course without developing a considerable collection of tarot. Here is a picture of a small sample of the thousand or so tarots I own. Later in the course I will provide a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) listing of modern tarots based on my collection and various other references, which may help you in building your own collection.



In this course we will look at tarot, **thematically** (celtic tarots, feminist, magical, cat tarots, etc), **by country or region** (Italian tarots, Japanese, South American, Eastern European etc), **by their medium** (oil paintings, watercolours, line drawings, etc), **promotional decks** given out for free, the **works of important tarot artists** ( Folchi, Solari, Casari, Gillabel, etc), **decks from a particular period** or made by the important publishers, and so on. There is a wealth of material to examine, so I hope you will want to join me on this journey through the artwork of modern tarot. This will be an experiential course, one of exploration, rather than deep intellectual analysis or complex history. Though it will be important to analyse the designs and place them in their proper context, this course is not designed to be a formal, intellectual, scholarly treatise, but rather an intelligent guided journey through the riches of tarot art.

## APPENDIX

Some suppliers of tarot cards accessible through the internet.

Tarot garden	<a href="http://www.tarotgarden.com">http://www.tarotgarden.com</a>
Alida	<a href="http://www.alidastore.com">http://www.alidastore.com</a>
R. Somerville	<a href="http://www.playingcardsales.co.uk/cards/">http://www.playingcardsales.co.uk/cards/</a>
Ganesha	<a href="http://www.ganesha.be/kaarten.htm">http://www.ganesha.be/kaarten.htm</a>
House of Tarot	<a href="http://www.houseoftarot.com/">http://www.houseoftarot.com/</a>
librairie Dix de coeur	<a href="http://www.dixdecoeur.com/pages/vente/liste-tarot.htm">http://www.dixdecoeur.com/pages/vente/liste-tarot.htm</a>

Please check this web page for additional material related to this lesson.

<http://www.alchemywebsite.com/tarot/course01notes.html>