

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

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## Lesson 15 : Alchemical Tarots

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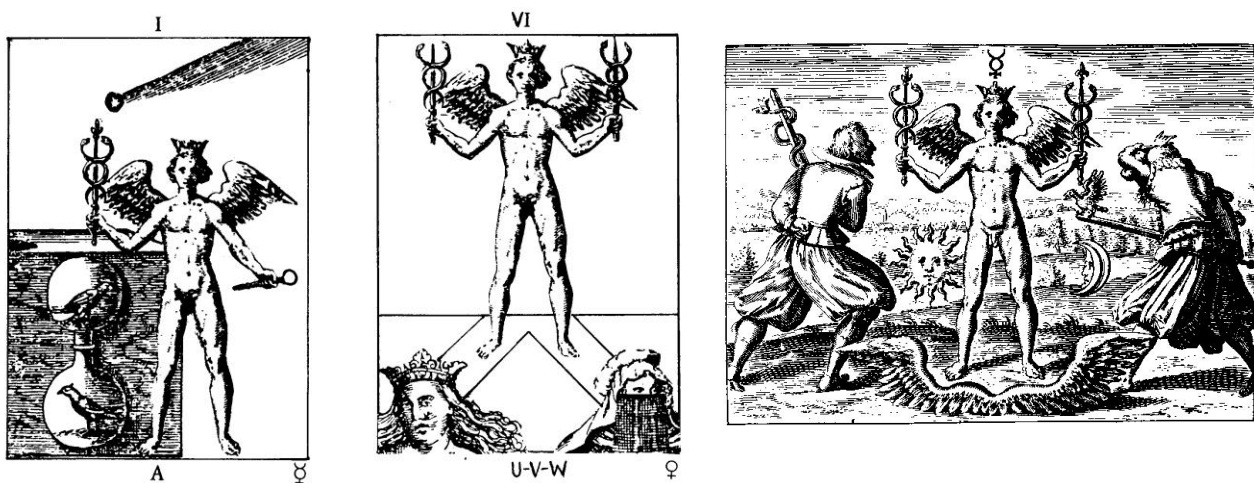
The wonderful imagery of alchemy has often influenced tarot artists of our age, however, it seems that no original alchemical text ever mentioned tarot, and it is likely that alchemists would only have viewed tarot as a card game, and not have seen any connection of this card game to alchemy. The modern mind, having been immersed in a century or more of the mystification of the esoteric writers, has come to believe that there is a direct connection. This mystification or myth creation began in the late 18th century with Etteilla (1738-91) whose ideas were consolidated by Eliphas Levi (1810-75). Arising from such writers was the idea that tarot was an esoteric system connected with alchemy. This is an entirely a-historical and false idea unsupported by any evidence in books and manuscripts but one which is, nevertheless, seductive and appealing, so much so that it is now accepted by most people as actual reality. This confusion arises primarily out of the fact that alchemical texts, manuscripts and books, were often illustrated with emblematic pictures. These emblematic pictures can appear, on the surface, very similar to the pictures on tarot cards, and for this reason people are drawn to perceiving a connection, even though this is not in the historical record.

The French occultists of the late 19th century, as well as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and other groups, so muddled the matter by projecting all sorts of alchemical ideas onto the tarot, that it is impossible for most people to untangle this. Suffice it to say, that there was no connection between alchemy and tarot till the 19th century.

During the modern tarot period, which is the main interest of this study course, a number of people were drawn to the rich symbolic material of alchemy and decided to incorporate this into tarot designs. Books such as John Reid's *Prelude to Chemistry*, 1936 and Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*, (English edition, 1968) had printed many examples of the emblematic woodcuts and engravings found in alchemical books, and sources like these were raided for imagery. So we saw the appearance of a number of tarot decks constructed out of this vast sea of alchemical emblems.

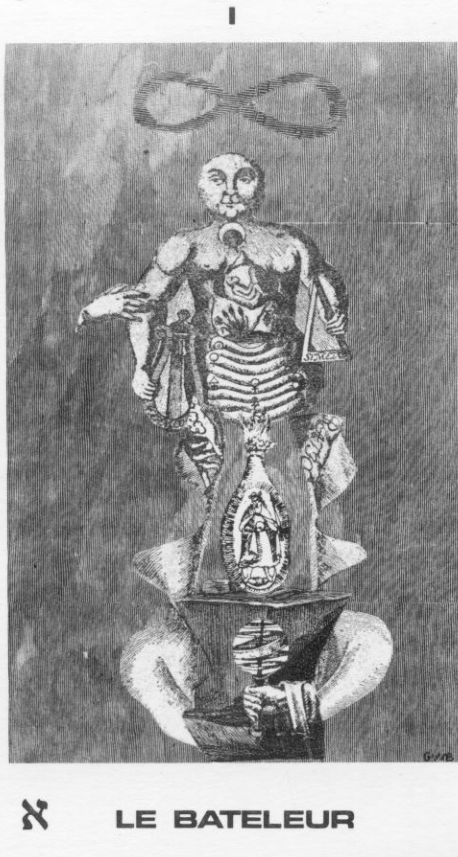
- 1976 Golden Cycle Tarot - John Sandbach
- 1979 Tarot de Gwen
- 1987 De Hierofant's Alchemisten Tarot - Guido Gillabel
- 1988 Alchemical Tarot - Rafal Prinke
- 1990 Hermetic Tarot - Dirk Gillabel
- 1990 Alchemical Tarot - Dirk Gillabel
- 1993 Tarocchi di Paracelso
- 1995 Alchemical Tarot - Robert Place
- 2004 Full metal alchemist
- 2006 Alchemical Emblems Tarot
- 2006 Alchemical Wedding Tarot

The first alchemical tarot is probably that of the American astrologer and occultist, John Sandbach. He issued a 78 card deck, the Golden Cycle Tarot in 1976 as an edition of 500 copies and later in 1982 used the 22 Major arcana from this deck as the basis for his book *Astrology, Alchemy and the Tarot*. John Sandbach collaborated with Ronn Ballard and Antoinette Sandbach in creating the Golden Cycle Tarot. They did not use alchemical imagery straight from its original context, but rather collaged bits and pieces from various alchemical engravings and other related emblematic engravings and drawings. In a number of the major arcana he re-uses the same imagery but modified by cut and paste. This deck, produced before the computer graphics age, was made by cutting up photocopies of alchemical emblems and pasting these into collages. Many of the images appear in Manly Palmer Hall's *An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic, and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy*, a large format book which was well known in America at that time so I suspect this could be one of Sandbach and Ballard's primary sources. Below we see their Magician and Chariot cards. Both of these draw on the figure of the winged double Mercury from a well known early 17th century alchemical text the *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* - here we have the engraving of the 'Second Key' from this work. We can see how they have altered it in the first image of the Magician, but leave it unchanged in their Chariot.



This is a rather interesting deck in that its creators have a reasonably clear philosophy underlying their designs and they feel entirely comfortable in pillaging and altering the alchemical emblems to achieve the ideas they want to portray.

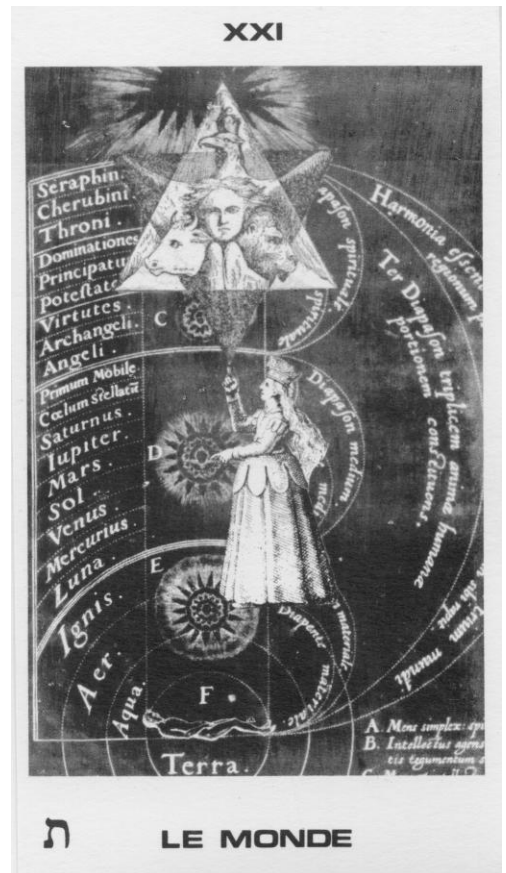
Only a few years after Sandbach and Ballard's deck, Gwenaël Belleil issued her major arcana deck and book *Tarot de Gwen*. She used many steel engravings from 19th century books, and collaged these with sections from alchemical copperplate engravings of the 17th century. The overall impression is a somewhat more dense symbolic structure than the Sandbach. We have Gustave Dore style backgrounds on which she arrays the alchemical and other symbolism. Thus her first card the Bateleur (Magician) uses part of a well known alchemical emblem taken from the frontispiece of a book by a 17th century alchemist J. Becher. In the tarot image she clips off the rays around the head of the figure and places below an image of a flask from a famous alchemical work, the *Splendor solis*.



Here she has redrawn the image of the queen in the flask from a 17th century engraving of the *Splendor solis* image. Below she has a hand holding an armillary sphere from some unidentified engraving.

Those who know alchemical, astrological and other related emblematic imagery will be able to identify much of

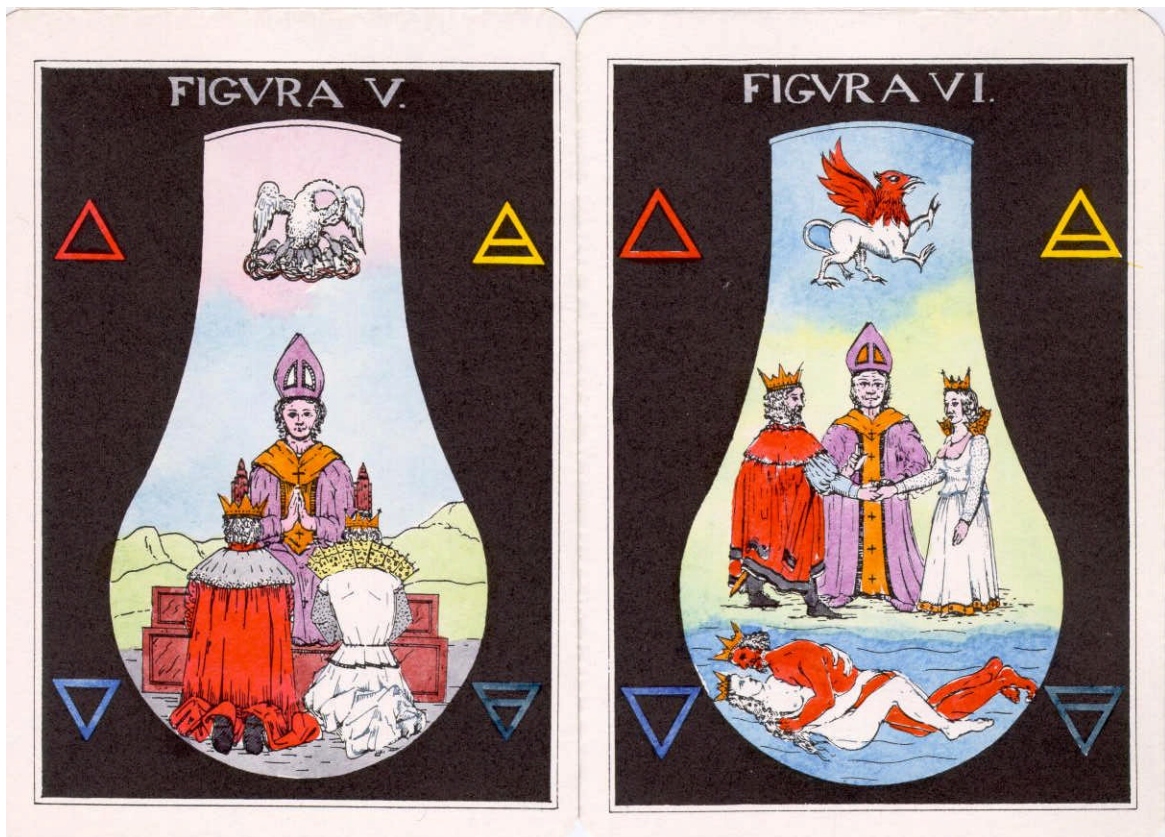
the source material from which she has drawn. She uses some neat tricks too. On the Devil card, she incorporates, as her background, a page of writing from a Latin magical manuscript, but she mirrors the image to make it unreadable and perhaps more mysterious. Her use of what seem to be 19th century engravings as backgrounds, is reminiscent of Max Ernst's surrealistic novel in collage *Une Semaine de Bonté*, 1934. In a number of the cards one finds parts of illustrations from the books of the 19th century French occultist Eliphas Levi. Her 'La Mort' has the conventional skeletons with a section pasted from a Hieronymus Bosch painting. The Fool stands apart from the other cards in that the design is circular. The image of the World uses an



engraving from the 17th century hermetic and alchemical writer Robert Fludd which has been photographically reversed into negative, with an image from Eliphas Levi and a small section of a 17th century engraving from an alchemical book by J.D. Mylius pasted on top. It would be a good exercise for those familiar with such imagery to attempt to identify as many of the components of the Tarot de Gwen card images as possible.

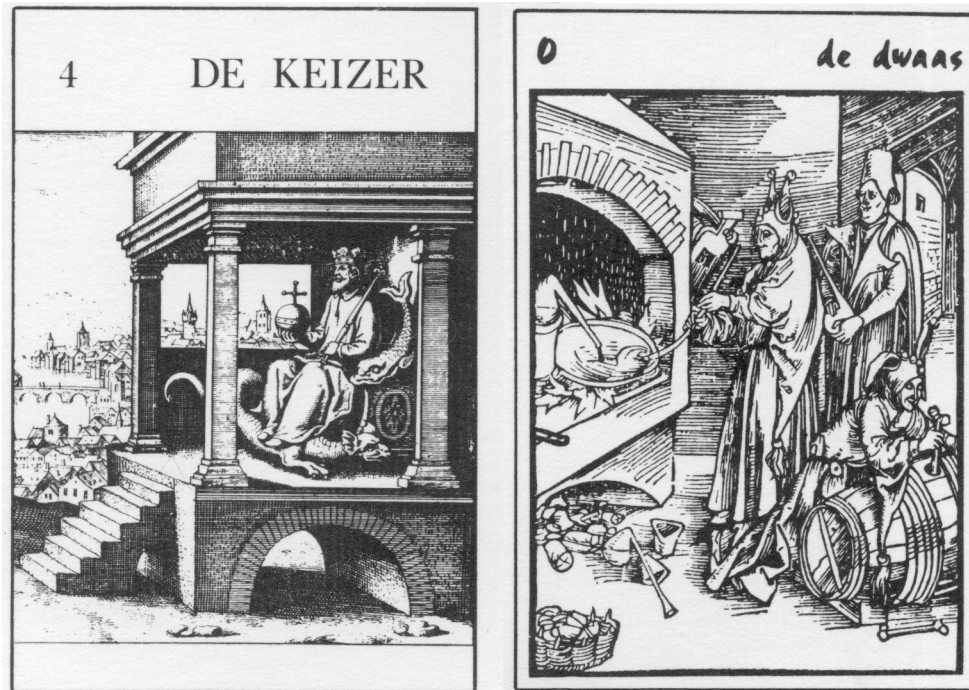
Later in the 1980's, my friend, the Polish writer and scholar Rafal Prinke, who had made a considerable study both of tarot and alchemy, produced a series of 22 designs for a tarot deck. These I published in the Summer and Autumn 1988 issues of an alchemical magazine that I edited called the *Hermetic Journal*. I came up with the idea of publishing this as a deck but in a hand coloured version, and had approached another colleague of mine, Edward O'Donelly to redraw the imagery and hand colour the decks. These were taken up by K. Frank Jensen's publishing venture Ouroboros in Denmark and published a year later in both a black and white and an individually hand coloured version.

Rafal Prinke, being well studied in both tarot and alchemy, tried to find in alchemical symbolism some parallels with the tarot Major arcana, rather than basing his imagery on the perhaps more aesthetic considerations of Gwenaël Belleil, or on the cut and pasting of fragments of emblems that characterizes Sandbach's tarot. Prinke's work attempts an integration of tarot with alchemical imagery through understanding both traditions, rather than merely choosing imagery with aesthetic considerations. The colouring scheme is also very important as this corresponds to the use of colour in original alchemical manuscripts.



Few copies of this deck ever come onto the market.

The Alchemisten Tarot of Guido Gillabel was produced in 1987. This is a Major arcana deck and my copy is printed black on cream card. Guido Gillabel (not to be confused with his brother Dirk Gillabel a prolific creator of twelve tarot decks to date) here uses for most of his cards entire emblems from alchemical books and manuscripts. One or two are cropped, but these are integral images and not collaged or constructed from fragments as with the other decks we have looked at so far. These images have been really well chosen to reflect the tarot card symbolism, and Gillabel must have thought very carefully about his choices. It is a rather nice conceit to use different typefaces for the titles of each of the cards.



For his Fool Gillabel uses the well known satirical image of the foolish alchemist from Sebastian Brandt's *Das Narrenschiff* or 'Ship of Fools' engravings from 1494. The Emperor is from the alchemical 'Book of Lambspring', 1625.

This is a very well conceived deck and comes in a rather fine little wooden box. It was printed in an edition of 120 copies and is well worth collecting.

In 2001, the other Gillabel brother, Dirk, under his nom de tarot, 'Medicator', issued his Alchemical Tarot. Originally conceived as paintings on glazed tiles in the late 1980's, for the printed version these were redrawn on terracotta backgrounds in bright colours. Many of the images for the cards derive from alchemical emblems. He also produced a Hermetic Tarot, again originally painted on tiles (square rather than the upright rectangles of the Alchemical Tarot) and in a similar styled artwork. The imagery on his Hermetic Tarot is perhaps more archetypal tarot than alchemical, though there are symbolic references to alchemy on many of the cards.



6. The Lovers

Here we see Dirk Gillabel's painting for the Lovers for his Alchemical Tarot. This is taken from a well known alchemical engraving which appears on the title page of Elias Ashmole's great compendium of early English alchemical poetry the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* of 1652. This engraving was itself taken from a drawing in a 15th century manuscript now in the British Library. This is a good choice for the lovers as it shows the two alchemical principles, personified here as male and female, being brought together by being bathed in a shower of liquid derived from the sun and moon in the flask with seven spouts which is being held by the monk like



figure descending from the clouds.

Dirk Gillabel's choice of alchemical material as the basis for his paintings would seem to show that, like his brother, he has made some considerable study of alchemy and is not merely choosing items because he felt attracted to them aesthetically.

In 1995 the first mass market alchemical tarot was issued by Harper Collins. This was created by Robert M. Place and Rosemary Ellen Guiley. Place has also created the Angels Tarot in 1995, Tarot of the Saints 2001, and Buddha Tarot 2004. He is a fine artist and illustrator using fine pen drawings to mimic the style of woodcuts and engravings. He has a very good eye for creating related curves which brings a harmony to his drawings. These have been coloured using thin layers and such subtle graduations of tone that they could well have been done in Photoshop or some other computer graphics program. He does not slavishly copy original alchemical woodcuts and engravings but recreates them in a modern way. The expressions and bodily forms he gives to the figures depart from the 16th and 17th century style and are entirely modern and thus perhaps more approachable by a general audience. It is this perhaps that persuaded a mass market publisher to handle it. It certainly proved to be very popular and engaging to its audience. If someone with a deep knowledge of alchemical imagery looks through the cards they will recognize many sources in alchemical emblems.



Here we see an example the way Robert Place has reworked the original alchemical image which was an engraving from a book by the alchemist Michael Maier *Symbola aurea mensae*, printed at Franckfurt in 1617. Maier's book presents us with alchemists of twelve nations, and here we have a depiction of Maria the Jewess. The idea being originally depicted is perhaps not entirely that of Temperance, but rather an alchemical idea about two fumes which must be united in order to prepare the white stone.



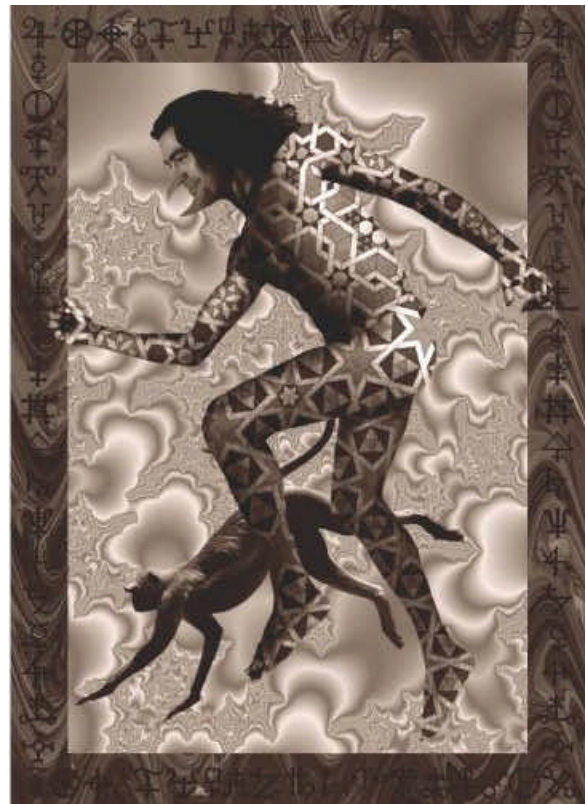
For the Star, Place drew on an engraving from a book printed in 1613 called *Azoth*, sometimes ascribed to an alchemist called Basil Valentine, which depicts a strange double-tailed mermaid. In the original engraving and in the text of the book no 'star' is mentioned, and the focus of the emblem is upon this Goddess of the Sea who emits blood and milk from each of her breasts which are to be cooked by the alchemist into gold and silver. Place perhaps recognizes this and puts the Sun and Moon (the gold and silver planets) among the seven stars (planets) in the sky above.

This deck is well conceived and beautifully realised. Once it went out of print it became very sought after and collectable. It has, in 2006, been reissued by Place as a limited edition larger format art deck.

For many years I myself have been colouring alchemical emblems, woodcuts, manuscript drawings and engravings, from the original alchemical works. I put scans of these paintings onto my web site and indeed sold a few of these as prints, and used these in other projects. It came as quite a pleasant surprise when in 2005 I discovered that F. J. Campos in Spain had taken these thumbnail images and turned them into a tarot deck. I got in touch with him and offered to publish this as an actual deck of cards and thus the Alchemical Emblems tarot was born in 2006. I myself had no part in choosing the imagery for the cards. Campos decided to use whole images or cropped sections of images rather than resorting to collage. Some of these are remarkably appropriate. Campos has a good eye for imagery and has created over forty tarots from different types of material. You can see and download most of his work from the Orphalese tarot system.



In 1616 an amazing allegorical alchemical story was published, the *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*. This idea resonated with various alchemical emblems of the period which depicted the meeting and merging of the two opposing aspects of the alchemical work as a kind of 'alchemical wedding'. Much use of this idea was later made by Carl Jung and his followers, and the idea became almost essential in any book on esoteric ideas published in the late 20th century. So the idea became almost commonplace and entered into the esoteric phraseology. The prolific American artist David Aronson, who works in the media of drawings, painting and digital art, created designs for a tarot deck based on this idea of the alchemical wedding, or conjunction of opposites. The artwork is powerful and disturbing but also seductive in the quality and finish of the imagery. As in all his art, he here deals with hard and disturbing ideas, bringing together and clashing polar opposites against one another. These images were realised on a computer and use all the tricks and techniques of that medium. He bases much of his work on photographs and drawings, modifying them digitally, adding special textures and rendering the surfaces to create a sumptuous three dimensional aspect. In many ways the imagery is conventionally tarot, though seen through the highly polished perspective of Aronson's graphic work. There are disturbing images here, and the use of masks tends to give the human figures an archetypal, yet at the same time, a sinister presence. I myself was so seduced by these images that I decided to publish the Major arcana in my Art Tarot series in 2006.





There remain just a few alchemical related tarot to discuss.

In 1993 a Tarocchi di Paracelso was designed by Arrigo Pecchioli who had earlier in 1982 created the Tarocchi del Duomo di Siena. Paracelsus (1493-1541) was, of course a famous 16th century alchemist, and this deck was issued to mark the fifth centenary of his birth. This tarot uses images from a famous 16th century alchemical manuscript, contemporary with Paracelsus though not in any way connected to him, called the *Splendor solis*. This manuscript has twenty two illuminated images painted on vellum, though there was no connection at that time to the twenty two trumps of the tarot and the symbolism instead entirely reflects alchemical allegorical ideas. I have not seen this deck, though it is mentioned in Kaplan IV page 456. Pecchioli, or the graphic artists who worked on the cards, have unfortunately muddled the order of some of the images and in some cases seem to have given them the wrong titles.

In 2002 Editions Fabbri of France issued a deck entitled the Tarot Alchimique. This in fact was a reprinting of the late 16th century Sola Busco tarot, perhaps the earliest complete tarot deck to have survived. Two years before in 2000 Lo Scarabeo issued this as the Ancient Enlightened Tarot, using images apparently redrawn and coloured in the early 20th century, copied quite closely from an original 16th copy which seems to have subsequently disappeared. Lo Scarabeo must have allowed Editions Fabbri to issue this in their 2002 version, which dispenses with Lo Scarabeo's multilingual labels and the titles which intrude into the lower part of the image. Despite the relabelling, this tarot has minimal alchemical content as such, but instead arises out of 16th century Italian art and emblematics.

I cannot resist mentioning the Japanese Manga Full Metal Alchemist. This cartoon show for television has many of characters using magical circles to effect transmutations, the 'alchemists circles'. From 2004, as part of the marketing of the cartoon show, a number of different tarot decks with this title were issued. These have no real tarot structure but just use the set of cards as a way of showcasing the characters in the anime show. Some Taiwanese companies seem to have pirated version of these decks.

To summarise, we can say that although tarot and alchemy continued to live entirely separate existences during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, they were conflated by 19th century occultists and through the 20th century this idea became consolidated, so much so that most people today, including tarot artists, believe there is a connection. So modern tarot designs reflect alchemical imagery. In some cases this may just appear on an individual card in a deck, but as we have seen in this lesson, there were a number of decks which were conceived as somehow 'alchemical'.