

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



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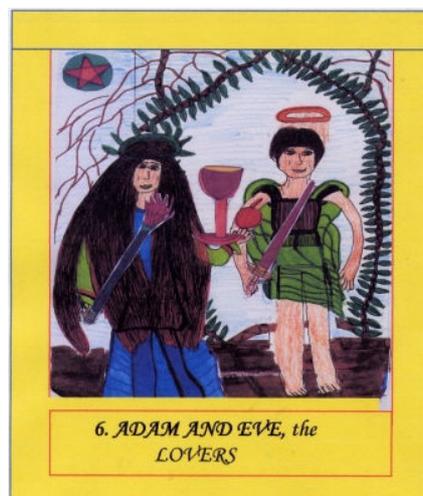
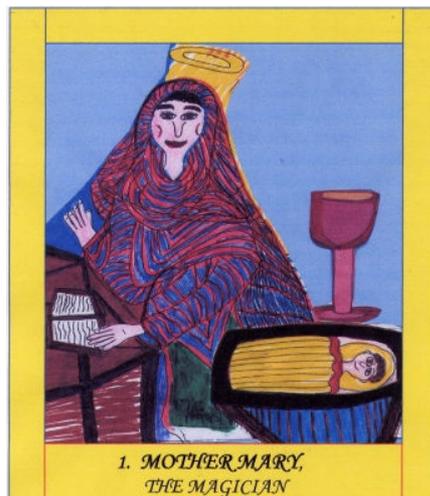
## Lesson 24 : Naïve Tarots.

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In contrast to the high art tarots we looked at in the previous lesson let us now examine tarots which can be described as being in a 'naïve' style. As we shall see in this area not all is as it might appear to be at first glance.

One of the best examples of naïve art in tarot is *The Star that Never Walks Around*, 2002, by the American, Stella Bennett, who confessed in the book that came with the cards that she had little artistic ability. We looked at her artwork in lesson 20 and saw that despite her perhaps rather poor drawings, the deck worked rather well.

A similar situation holds with the tarot art of the Canadian Cheryl Carlyle. She is very prolific, having produced seven full 78 card decks including *Sacred Circle Native Honour Tarot*, the *Cosmic Circle of Angels Tarot*, the *Guardian Angels of Mercy Tarot*, and the *Hello from Heaven*, with more in preparation.



Carlyle's abilities in drawing are far eclipsed by her imagination and this perhaps characterizes the best of naïve tarot art, where the creative concept struggles with the execution, and out of this dynamic there sometimes emerges a work that demonstrates its own merit. This is certainly true of both Cheryl Carlyle and Stella Bennett.

Another fascinating deck is the Mundane Tarot of American Marybeth Cantwell. She created the designs and drew the outlines in pen and then had her seven year old son, Jon, colour them in with coloured pencil or felt tip markers - the title card for the deck actually shows this in a little picture. The cards are printed on rather poor quality inkjet and cut out by hand with scissors so that they are a bit irregular. We are here far removed from the polished artwork of Folchi, Kat Black or Ciro Marchetti, but here the designs are domestic, autobiographical and full of humour.



The Fool shows a woman being given an ultrasound scan to confirm her pregnancy. The Hanged Man shows a woman upside down on one of those strange exercise machines that people are encouraged to buy, while in the Nine of Pentacle the Mother lies in bed with her child while a cat sleeps on the bedcover. In a strange way the designs for this deck are quite touching, as we are being given a little look into Marybeth Cantwell's life. Her tarot is partly an autobiography. It seems no artifice or cynical manipulation is being pressed on us here. What we see is what we get.

The Kippen Tarot of the Dutch woman Tina Augustijn is a delightful photographic tarot of chickens seen through the 22 arcana.



**I De Magiër**



**XVI De Toren**



**XIV Gematigdheid**

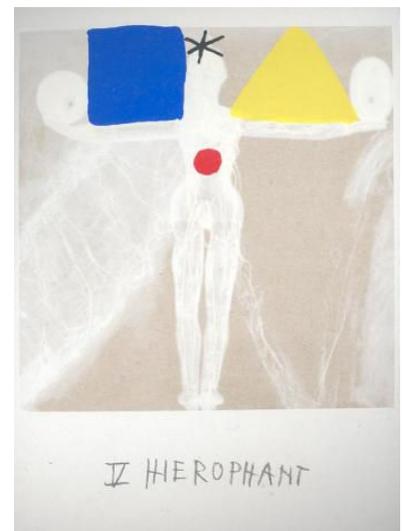
Tina Augustijn seems to have a smallholding with a number of different breeds of chickens and having taken photographs of them over the years came to realise that some of these photos could well stand as tarot images.

As I said earlier, all is not as it appears on the surface. Consider the tarot of Elsa Dax.



These would appear at first glance to be rather naively painted images, using acrylic broken down into thin washes. The forms lack modelling and appear to show little technical competence. However, we here have no outsider artist such as Cheryl Carlyle or Marybeth Cantwell, but Dax is in fact one of the major players in the anti-conceptual art movement and has had many international exhibitions and been represented by the prestigious Saatchi Gallery in London. Dax is part of a modern art grouping called Stuckism, a term which refers to a derogatory remark of Tracy Emin, one of the conceptualist Brit Art group, who said that figurative art was “stuck” (in a rut) as opposed to the perceived creativity of conceptualism. The Stuckists were apparently happy to adopt this title and promoted figurative painting in opposition to the prevailing conceptual art embraced by the art establishment in Nicholas Serota (formerly of Tate Modern) and the Turner Prize. Dax’s work must be seen in context. She is an insider, part of a well established art movement with a programme of promoting a return to figurative painting and a retreat from the excesses and emptiness of conceptual art. She seems to adopt a style close to naïve art, rather than producing highly finished and detailed photo-realist paintings. We see in her tarot designed in 1999, a battle of modern art movements being played out. All is not as it seems.

An earlier example of a tarot deck by an established artist which appears to be a naïve deck, is the Tarot 88 of the artist Johannes (Hans) Dörflinger, whose tarot of 1975 we looked at in the previous lesson on European Art Tarots. That was obviously in an abstract modern style, but for the tarot prints he later produced in 1988, he adopted forms which appear to be contrived in an unpolished figurative style. During the last decades of the twentieth Century it was difficult for artists (with a few exceptions) to work in a representational figurative style as the art establishment and media had an agenda of promoting an unpolished almost offhand manner of execution. Artistic creativity was stylised as work which appeared spontaneously without much thought, skill or obvious technique. Of course, this was often merely a device and contrivance of the artist. Here Dörflinger, deeply influenced by tarot imagery for much of his artistic life, created tarot prints acceptable to the art world of that time.



Matthias Bormann is a German esoteric polemicist who has written many books and appears to see society through the filter of conspiracy theories. He works in the field of alternative therapy and has formed a Thanatopsychologisches Institute. This appears to present a psychotherapy which focuses on coming to terms with death. He proclaims himself a priest of the 'mattoistischen Ordens' the Order of Fools, even issuing CD-Roms and books about his magical order. In 1994 he issued his tarot deck and book *Tarot des Matto*.



His Fool lies tied to a bed, like a prisoner in a torture chamber, and his brain appears to be being affected by the rays from the outside world, pictured as the window. From his mouth a bubble of spirit seems to emerge perhaps in way of defiance. Bormann's world is one of paranoia and the manipulation of the individual by external State forces. Thus his Justice shows justice dispensed by a figure with a cigar, representing big business capitalism, and this is reflected in a mirror, suitable skewed at an angle to indicate bias. Bormann's art would appear to have been made with white chalk or crayon on black paper (or even scraperboard). His drawing is rather poor and the style somewhat childlike, but the images are well conceived. The concept is certainly not naïve though the execution of the artwork obviously is. Through his use of white on black, Bormann creates a disturbing space in which his tarot figures appear, and the rather clumsy and stark drawings seem to strengthen the sense of brooding menace that he appears to be trying to evoke in his *Tarot des Matto*. Thus his artwork is entirely appropriate and suited to his message.

Thus we can see that there are a number of reasons why artists have adopted a naïve style for their tarot. To understand their context we sometimes have to consider the 'sub-text' or the intention underlying the images. We cannot look naively at naïve art.

Most of the commercially produced tarots are rigorously edited as they have to survive financially, thus the artwork can sometimes become rather overworked and polished to a high degree. This provides the opportunity for artists to kick against these overly controlled images by adopting a simple style as a contrast to overproduced forms. A rather fine example of this is the Stick Figure Tarot of Lar deSouza, based on the Rider Waite deck. Lar is a professional caricaturist and illustrator, with a broad portfolio of work. In 1999 he produced a simply drawn tarot using the stick figure for the human form, often used by children. One might be excused for initially thinking this to be a naïve tarot but on deeper inspection one can see it is a work of a skilled artist adopting this style for a purpose.



The Italian Marco De Martinis should be well known to collectors, as he is a dealer, mostly in Italian art tarots. He knows the material and the artists as well as anyone. In 2006 he issued I Tarocchi di Marco in a small printed edition of 25 copies. The original artwork was in coloured marker pens, fine tipped pens and some applied tempera. The backs of the cards have a simple flower design added by hand after the fronts were printed.



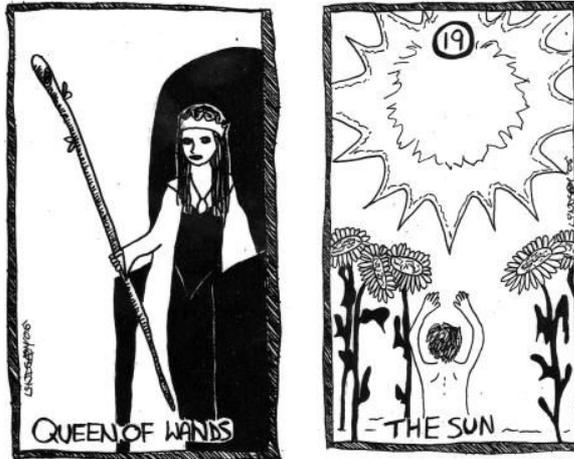
The phrase ‘naïve charm’ springs immediately to mind. There seems to be no subtext to this tarot, no embedded message or intent. De Martinis is totally aware of the art of modern tarot and yet has chosen to create a series of simple, childlike images in outline, done in bright almost luminous colours. Perhaps he was just having fun making a tarot and because of his situation as a tarot dealer was able to sell a few copies to his customers.



tarot taking delight in making a tarot of his own and wanting to add something to the large body of existing tarots.

Later in 2006 he made another tarot, this time by hand, in an edition of only five copies – I Tarocchi della “Suggestione”. These were made on parchment effect paper. The images are sketched in soft pencil then coloured with watercolours. The use of the translucent parchment no doubt helped the production, the copies could be traced through from an original master. Again there seems to be no grand scheme underlying the imagery and we must just think of this arising as a result of a passionate collector of wanting to add something to the large

At first sight Elliot's Tarot, designed and hand made by Lindsay Waterworth of Tasmania in Australia would seem to be a rather appealing and naively produced variation on the familiar Rider Waite deck in black and white.



The artwork has been drawn in pen and then large areas filled in by brushing black ink. The effect is powerful due to the contrasting areas. Lindsay Waterworth is a pagan wiccan and seems also to have some interest in the goth lifestyle, and we catch glimpses of these influences in details of the imagery. However, this deck arose out of a personal tragedy for Lindsay Waterworth. The 'Elliot' of the title was her son, who was born prematurely with a life-threatening medical condition and sadly died after eight months. He spent his whole life in hospital undergoing operations and medical procedures. Out of that terrible experience, Lindsay Waterworth has created her tarot as a kind of memorial to her son, but here we find no descent into maudlin sentiment, and instead a kind of celebration of life. There are only a very few subtle references, which one will not pick up unless one knows what Waterworth had gone through. The imagery is poignant yet never sentimental.



The Empress is here shown pregnant, and Judgment show the angel trumpeting the awakening of the souls from their graves, but here it is a foetus rather than a fully grown human form. This echoes the tragedy of Elliot's life in that he was judged, in a sense, before

his birth, by being struck with his congenital medical condition. One would never pick up that resonance merely by examining the cards with no knowledge of the artist's life experience. Lindsay Waterworth's Major Arcana have some focus on death and she uses the image of a figure split into a skeleton half and a living half in her Justice and Temperance cards, and the skeleton appears also on the World and the Hanged Man. The deck does not, however, dwell on death and her personal tragedy, but is wonderfully open, honest and life-affirming. There is no indication given with the deck about Elliot and Lindsay's life, though one can find this on her personal web site.

We earlier looked at the autobiographical Mundane Tarot of American Marybeth Cantwell and might be tempted to draw a parallel, but here Lindsay Waterworth surely transcends autobiography and produces a wonderfully celebratory deck. Whoever thought that tarot drawn in a naïve style could not be powerful and engaging !

