

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



Lesson 4 : Tarot with a purpose - Some issue decks

Perhaps one of the most basic of issues for human beings centres around gender and sexuality. Societies have so often restricted the development of women or created unfair prejudices against gay people that it is not surprising that some tarot artists have used the medium of tarot to explore such issues.

One of the early feminist decks is *Thea's Tarot* (1984) by Ruth West. This presents us with a woman only tarot in which there are no male figures. The conventional tarot seems to balance male and female figures so one can see that it was perhaps necessary for some artist to push that balance over to an extreme. *Thea's Tarot* was made by cutting black paper, like old silhouettes, rather than being drawn in pen, and despite the limitations of the medium Ruth West is able to create powerful expressive images. Her deck of 78 cards is fully emblematic throughout, with conventional wands, cups, sword and pentacles as the suits. The courts are named Child, Daughter, Mother and Amazon of cups, etc. The images on the pip cards to some extent draw on the Rider-Waite pip emblems, though rendered entirely in Ruth West's style, so that it is not always easy to see the parallel. But a few key cards, such as the Two of Swords clearly demonstrates the influence from Pamela Coleman-Smith's classic pip emblems. Her major arcana remain close in conception to the Waite deck, though she adopts the Marseilles order (with Justice 8 and Strength 11). She renames some of the cards. Thus her Fool is 'Innocence', High Priestess 'The Seer', Empress 'The Creator'.



Her Wheel of Fortune becomes 'The Comet', Hanged Man 'Art', Death 'The Juggler', Temperance is for her 'Grace', while the Death card is renamed to 'Oppression' showing a woman in chains. The remainder use the same titles except for Judgement which is now 'Rebirth'. These are not radical renaming of the cards and instead Ruth West chooses to reflect the issue of women in a subtle and charming way, rather than engaging in polemic. 'Thea' is a feminisation of the Greek



‘Theos’ (masculine God - ‘Deus’ in Latin). The artist seems to enjoy using ideas of polarity in her imagery. Thus her ‘Seer’ or Priestess is shown balancing a dark and a light side, her Lovers are a white and a dark skinned woman, while her ‘Art’ (Hanged Man), is a woman, pictured almost like a puppet, hung between black and white. So much careful thought has gone into the designs as well as the creativity of the artwork itself, that this deck repays much study.



There is an excellent web site, *Herstory of Women's Tarot*, devoted to the evolution of Women's tarot.

<http://www.lelandra.com/comptarot/womanstarottimeline.htm>

Many of the so called ‘women’s tarots’ seem celebratory of womankind rather than directly challenging the societal role of women. They opt for positive affirmation rather than attacking stereotypes and prejudices. A number of such decks emerged including the *Amazon* (1979), *Book of Aradia* (1980), the *Daughters of the Moon* (1986), the *Tarot of the Crone* (1998), the *Wise Woman’s* (2002) among others.

I have not been able to find a tarot which identifies itself as entirely lesbian in orientation, and the ‘women’s tarots’ seem not to wish to become exclusive. In the case of the issue of male gay sexuality, of course, things are different. Some tarot artists explore aspects of the male image through their designs but these are not exclusively gay. In 2004 two gay tarots were published, one with painted images by Antonella Platano designed by Lee Bursten called the *Gay Tarot*, which is very innocent and I suspect lacks any reality or street credibility, while the other, a photographic collage tarot by Patric Stillman called the *Brotherhood Tarot*, is more realistic and thus might be recognisable by the gay community as reflecting, even in a small way, realities of the gay experience in progressive Western societies, or at least the West Coast American scene. Chris Butler in the UK is working on the *Son Tarot* which presents a rich web of symbolism with a focus on maleness.



Here we see the *Gay Tarot's* rather sentimental and perhaps overly politically correct view of the Lovers and the Wheel of Fortune.



The *Brotherhood Tarot* steers away from the idealised younger male forms of the *Gay Tarot* in favour of more mature male bodies in photographic collage.

In 2004 a tarot of gay bears the *Tarocchi Gay Orsi* was issued at Rome in a small edition of only 30 copies. This was based on a series of 22 watercolour paintings by Emilio Ortu Lieto, a theatrical scene and costume designer, which had been exhibited at various Gay Pride events in Italy. This was printed as a deck of 22 large format cards 150x90 mm for the occasion of the Gay Pride events in Rome, 2004. These are humorous and satirical images from an insider, and gently poke fun at the heavier built type of gay man.

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Political issues other than gender have also been explored through tarot designs. One early example is the *Anti-Nuclear Wendländisches Tarot*, designed by Waltraud Kremser back in 1980, at the height of the anti-nuclear movement. This tarot addressed the issue of the proposed construction of a Nuclear waste processing and disposal site at Gorleben in the Wendland region of Lower Saxony in Germany. The facility was eventually built and protests still continue. The Wendland Anti-Nuclear tarot is a majors only deck. It presents the anti-nuclear theme within a more positive view of a hippy rural idyll. The Fool depicts perhaps a representative of a German citizen oblivious of the issues, striding with his staff and a rifle over his shoulder towards a nuclear power station. The Lovers on the other hand shows us a couple, two people living close to the land, he with a saw to cut wood for fuel instead of relying on nuclear power and she sitting a large cooking pot over the fire. In the background we seen to glimpse a tepee and a wooden building with the flag of the Wendland, a sun radiating its heat and light. The Devil, of course, is the horror of nuclear power, shown as the German eagle holding a nuclear missile and the world in its grasp. In its feathers are an arsenal of nuclear weapons. This tarot was designed to highlight the nuclear issues for the local region of Gorleben when the nuclear processing plant was being proposed. This drew many protestors who wanted to keep the area free of this development and envisaged a kind of idyllic rural world. A contemporary report stated :

“Activists built and lived in an alternative village built on a test drilling site in Gorleben. They stayed throughout May 1980, until heavy police and army forces cleared away the village and protestors. [...] An estimated 10,000 police and army forces obliterated the ‘Republic of Free Wendland’. The site was occupied on the 3rd May by thousands of demonstrators and named “hut village 1004” (the site was officially named deep drilling site “1004”). The village was built of wooden huts and grew to a remarkable small village, including a sauna, piggery, windmills, solar energy heating system and even small tourist attractions. For many people, the Republic was not only symbolic of the struggle against nuclear energy but also an alternative way of living. On 4th June the village was cleared by using severe police force, for instance by flying helicopters very low above the people.”



This little tarot documents and idealises this political struggle. Here tarot documents an

important part of cultural history.

During the 1990's the growth of an anti-globalisation alternative politics lead to a series of often violent protests at the G7 conferences, which were seen as the forum for the developed nations to present a globalisation agenda, and were thus a sitting target for protestors. This tarot was produced in Naples in 1994 by GRIDAS 'Gruppo risveglio dal sonno' (the group awakening from sleep) which is a reference to a sentence from one of a series of engravings the *Caprichos* by Goya "the sleep of reason produces monsters". The back of the cards shows a face divided vertically, the left side being shown as a clown while the right side of the head is a skull. This is a majors only deck, of twenty cards, a few of which correspond to the usual tarot card names - il Papa, la Fortuna, la Luna, la Morte, il Sole - while the others are renamed and to some extent connect with the tarot card symbolism. The seven leaders who met for the 1994 G7 at Naples are caricatured as, Clinton the saxophonist warmonger, Mitterand, the ex-socialist neo-colonialist, Helmut Kohl of Germany, the anti-Turkish crook, the Canadian anti-native (for his supposed anti indigenous peoples policies). John Major, the British Conservative Prime minister, then immersed in scandal concerning an affair with a female colleague, is shown with erections sprouting like devil's horns from his head, while the Japanese are shown as the 'Miniaturista' a reference to their supposed ability of mass produce small items. A final doze of venom is reserved for the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who is labeled as the 'Fascist' card, arials sprouting from his head indicate his media and television interests. Here we are firmly in the area of polemic rather than serious political critique. The included leaflet indicates that "the consequences of the foolish politics of these seven leaders, in arranging for the capitalists to starve the people" is seen in the next group of cards - War, Embargo, Death, Unemployment, Ecological Disaster, Murderous Debt, the Aging Pope, the Monitarisation of the economy, North-South debt and the I.M.F. (International Monitary Fund). But they cannot destroy everything as is shown in the remaining four cards - the Sun, the Moon, the Wheel of Fortune, and the Circle of the People. Here we have a rather simplistic, if not naïve, political testament in the form of this *Tarocchi del "Anti-G7"* deck, which is nevertheless entertaining and fun.



Another deck designed with a political agenda is that of the Russian artist Igor Makarevich. This was created in the later part of the 1990s (between 1995 and 1998). Makarevich satirises the Hitler-Stalin Pact. This is also known as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, after the Foreign Ministers of Germany and the USSR who actually signed this non aggression document which allowed Hitler the freedom to conquer various European countries without fear of the Russians declaring a state of war. This is a Majors only tarot and it does not seem to have been issued as an actual deck of cards though individual art prints are available.



Here we have the two main figures Hitler the Magician and Stalin the Emperor. Hitler is depicted masturbating while Stalin is shown seated upon a skull and bones, a reference to the many massacres of opponent that he carried out in order to sustain his political power.



Temperance shows the vessel bearing the star of the USSR pouring into and nourishing and sustaining that with the Nazi swastika. The Sun card has a Hitler Youth figure

greeting warmly a Communist Youth. The satire is very obvious and quite cutting in places.

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A tarot deck was also used as part of a public health information scheme in Los Angeles in 1992, to help provide information about HIV/AIDS. Only seven cards were issued, though it is not clear whether the artist, Kim Abeles, planned to issue a full deck. The backs of the cards had important health information in English and Spanish about HIV/AIDS. The imagery is only loosely related to tarot, but I include it here as an example of how the idea of a tarot deck could be considered as a vehicle for distributing information on an issue.

