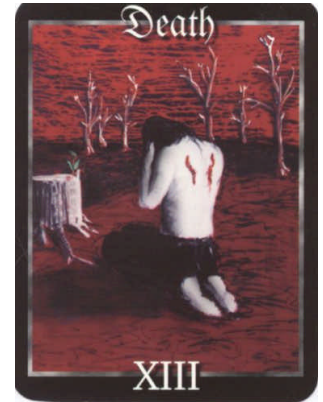


# Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot

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## Lesson 9 : Gothic themed decks

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We now jump to the opposite pole, away from the sweetness, humour and sentimentality of the cat themed tarots to the darker side that is found in the Gothic decks. Of course, not all of these are grim and gruesome, but more often are stylised and self-mocking.

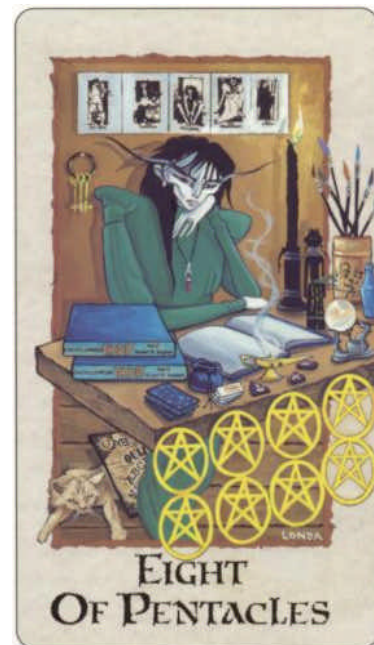
- 1987 Tarocco dell'Orror - Gianni Maiotti (Menegazzi)
- 1993 Londa Tarot - Londa Marks
- 1994 Necromantic Tarot - Leilah Wendell
- 1995 Gothic Tarot - Dawn Williams
- 1996 Lovecraft Tarot - David Wynn, Daryl Hutchinson and text by Eric Friedman
- 1998 Gothic Tarot - Leilah Wendell
- 1999 Fantastical Tarot - Nathalie Hertz
- 2000 Black Tarot - Luis Royo
- 2000 Marilyn Manson Tarot
- 2002 Gothic Tarot - Joseph Vargo and Christine Filipak
- 2002 Vampire Tarot - Nathalie Hertz
- 2003 Gothic Tarot of Vampires - Riccardo Minetti, Emiliano Mammuccari
- 2004 Book of Kaos - Orryelle Defenestrata-Basculé
- 2004 Guardian Tarot - Jeff Mincevic
- 2005 Labyrinth Tarot - Luis Royo
- 2005 Savage Tarot - MichelleX
- 2006 Corneal Edema - John R Dybowski

The Italian tarot publisher Meneghello seems to have been one of the first to jump into this theme with the *Tarocco dell'Orror*. This is a full deck and the artwork is comic book cartoon style, and with imagery seemingly drawn from the horror 'B' movie genre. This is a realm of irreverent fun rather than offensive or even dark and brooding gloom. The artist Gianni Maiotti, plays this theme for laughs rather than to shock. The major arcana designs often seem to stand on their head the normal meaning assigned to the card. Thus Temperance shows a glutton, the Hierophant or Pope depicts an inept surgeon with a sawn-off leg, the High Priestess is a fat, rather menacing and one suspects, sadistic, nurse, bearing a large hypodermic syringe about to descend on a patient. The Emperor is a fat gangster, the Wheel of Fortune is a torture device, and so on. It is horror, but definitely of the amusing kind. The pip cards, for the suit of cups, present us with a goblet



of blood in which an octopus is swimming, for pentacles we have a set of false teeth with ‘Dracula’ pointed fangs, swords shows us an eyeball impaled on a dagger, while wands depicts a frog being smashed with a club. The cartoon style renders these as images a childish humour, rather than anything serious or dark, but it appears to be one of the earliest of the gothic or horror tarots.

Londa Marks produced her first tarot in 1993, and since then has issued one more, the *Crow's Magick* in 1998 and is currently working on her *Alchemist Tarot* and a *Distant Sun Tarot*. We can perhaps include it in this group because of its ‘goth’ references. All the figures in this tarot are stylized as thin androgynous Goths. Apparently Londa Marks worked for some time in the 1980s designing costumes for a glam rock group. Her women often have those square profiled padded shoulders so popular in the 80’s, and all the figures adopt a rather cold expressionless stare, often engaging and almost challenging us as viewers. There is an undercurrent of magic and a knowing use of symbolism in her images. Her artwork is painted, with great attention given to the foreground figure. Her figures communicate as much by their posture and stance as by their expressions. Unlike the *Tarocco dell'Orrore* this is not primarily a tarot structured around humour, but it does have make little subtle visual jokes - the Eight of Pentacles is a particularly engaging self portrait complete with sketches and volume II and III of Kaplan’s *Encyclopedia of Tarot*. This is a tarot with attitude, it reaches out and shouts its style. It is well worth studying and just enjoying its imagery. Much has been made of the extra card which poses the question “Who are you really?” I doubt many of us are like the gothic characters with which she has populated her tarot, but we can be intrigued and drawn into their world. The tarot itself is based firmly on the Rider-Waite, and has emblematic pip cards obviously derived from that classic deck.





Leilah Wendell is truly interested in death. Her artwork reflects this entirely. In 1994 she issued her *Necromantic Tarot* to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the business venture Westgate Press that she had set up in 1979 to market her books, artwork and prints. This *Necromantic Tarot* is now rather rare but copies can still be found second-hand, though at a very high price. Leilah Wendell incorporates various elements into her paintings - beings of darkness and beings of light, skeletal figures, lightning strikes, graves and cosmic spaces. This is not a contrived style but is obviously a key part of her intellectual and symbolic ideas. This deck is regrettably printed in such a small format (a mere 3.5 by 2 inches - 90 by 50mm) that it does not allow us to fully appreciate her artwork, though some of these paintings are available as larger prints from her website. A few of the images are not paintings but photographic collage or photographs of sculptures. Her deep and sincere interest in the occult is

obvious from a glance at her output on her web site. In a strange way one comes to feel that her fascination with and centring on the idea of death is not at all morbid, but instead a realistic focus upon the one thing that is certain in our life.

Later in 1998 she produced the better known and more widely circulated *Gothic Tarot*. This was another majors only deck, but this time using photo-collage, based on monumental sculptures probably for the most part from graveyards. These have added collage elements, her lightning strokes make another appearance along with flows of light and cosmic spaces.

In 1995 another *Gothic Tarot* was published. The artwork was by Dawn Williams and the full deck of 78 cards was produced in a small edition of only 150 decks by [www.themysticeye.com](http://www.themysticeye.com). This focuses on the Bram Stoker vampire theme. The suits thus are Stakes (second death is final), Blood (life everlasting begins with the blood), Fangs (the dead are ever hungry) and Coins (human loyalty can be bought with gold). The Pips are not emblematic and the Court cards are also designed. The Majors each have a subtitle making a reference to the underlying 'vampire' mythology. Thus the Magician is 'Worker of the dark trick', the Hierophant 'Self-righteous ass, enemy of the undead', Demons (the Death card renamed) 'for the dead still dream', the Tower 'resting place of the never changing', and so on. Many of the major cards are re-named to fit into the vampire agenda. The artwork is in the style of a graphic artist



who does advertisements for newspapers or magazines. It is well executed with bold black outlines, strongly coloured areas with much use of fades and merges. Though it was done on a computer it mimics the style of airbrushed graphics. This is an excellent 'vampire' deck.



Luis Royo is an important and popular Spanish artist and illustrator, best known for his large format illustrated books and for his artwork on many CD covers. He is a prolific artist and has produced thousands of highly detailed paintings. Most of these could be categorised as 'fantastical art'. In 2000 the Spanish playing card publisher Heraclio Fournier issued Luis Royo's *Black Tarot*. This presents us with a kind of 'science fiction erotica' rather than gothic darkness. The accompanying text states in one place "The Black Tarot forms a symbolic group of the darkest side, so that the own 'self' and its demons emerge. The Beauty and the Beast which we carry inside." The pip cards of this full deck are not emblematic. The imagery on the major arcana does not closely adhere to the conventional tarot structures, though it is recognisable. There almost seems to be a narrative running through the major arcana. Scantly clad women seem to battle with or seduce in their BDSM gear, rather gruesome creatures in some science fiction landscape. The artwork is lavish and delightfully detailed.



Royo's 2005 *Labyrinth Tarot* also published by Fournier, is more tarot in conception and truly more gothic in tone. Here we have some truly amazing tarot images, in a greenish-grey toned sepia. This locates the artwork in a more gothic landscape than the highly polished colours of the *Black Tarot*. The artwork on the cards is small, but luckily Royo has published these images in a large format book, and here we can appreciate the imagery in all its detail. He also writes about the tarot imagery in a truly informed way and his text here shows he has studied tarot and esoteric ideas very intently. For his Minor courts, rather than the greenish-grey cast of the Majors he shifts the tones of the artwork on the suits, to earthy-brown for Pentacles, reddish-rose for Cups, Prussian blue for Swords, and a earthy-green for Wands. This is a very well conceived deck. The pictures for the major arcana are so imaginative and yet entirely traditional. There is an overall gothic style to the artwork, and though brooding and gloomy it does not have a sense of menace and angst. In his *Labyrinth Tarot* Royo touches on this dark gothic world with the delicacy of a sensitive, and aesthetic creativity. It delights in the beauty of this gothic style.

We now come to a truly dark gothic tarot, the partial deck of ten cards, which began to be issued with Marilyn Manson's CD's beginning with his 'Holy Wood' album of 2000. This is, in fact, a rather well constructed collage deck. As one would expect from a rock

music star, Manson's face appears on most of the cards. He is the Fool, Magician, High Priestess, Emperor, Hierophant, Hermit, Justice, Death, the Hanged Man and no doubt he also lurks behind the ram's head mask of the Devil. The figures are posed within primarily dark spaces and incorporate various symbols juxtaposed to be critical of American politics and culture. Thus the Emperor is a figure with artificial legs seated in a wheelchair and holding an automatic rifle. He wears a German Imperial helmet and behind him is set the stars section from the US flag. This is essentially a promo deck, but the artwork and intention of the artist is to reinforce the message of Manson's music. It certainly has dark images, but the collage is so well done and the messages well articulated that we should not dismiss this as something thrown together as a promotional feature. The artwork of this gothic deck does have its own integrity and strength. It may repel but it does engage its audience (as no doubt Manson's music does).



In 2002 and 2003, the two major tarot card publishers U.S. Games Systems and Lo Scarabeo both decided to visit the vampire theme. U.S. Games invited a French artist Nathalie Hertz to explore this. She adopted a light and gently humorous approach and presented us with thin, gaunt figures similar to those earlier used by Londa Marks. Here most of her figures are clearly vampires with sharp, pointed eye-teeth fangs. They all sport incredible hair styles. The backgrounds to most of the cards are dark, but style overwhelms any sense of the sinister and we have here an entirely entertaining deck. It is a full deck. The figures on the Court cards all seem to have recently been enjoying a blood meal and not had the decency to wipe their faces clean. The pip cards incorporate emblematic imagery in different ways on each suit. This seems unique to this deck. The emblematic forms fill the whole space on Pentacles (like on a normal emblematised deck), in Cups these are suggested through windows in the background, Wands have a emblem on each pip card shown in a small picture frame, while Swords have emblematic forms in grey, like statuary. There is lots of blood and vampire fangs about, but the sheer joyous style of the artwork means that one need not fear visits from nightmares after looking through this *Vampire Tarot* deck.



With Lo Scarabeo's Gothic Tarot of Vampires we are perhaps being asked to step into a more disturbing space. This is set in our contemporary world and many of the cards depict violence, bloodletting, and a number of cards seem to depict suicide through the cutting of veins in the wrists. The Major arcana of this 78 card deck do not have titles only numbers. The paintings by Emiliano Mammucari are in a comic book style with

drawn outlines, toned and highlighted with relatively large brushstrokes and modelled with washes. There seems to be some underlying narrative running through the Major arcana that is hinted at in the booklet as the 'Metaphor'. Through this metaphor of the vampire's journey (seen akin to the classical 'Journey of the Hero', perhaps that articulated by Joseph Campbell), the vampire moves from innocence, through a first awakening to knowledge of its power, and then to damnation and some final deliverance.



If this is the subtext to the Major arcana it is perhaps rather occluded. Many of the images may be found disturbing. Is it vampire sheik, and self-vampirism that is being depicted on card II? What exactly is that bloody kiss about on Card XIII (supposedly the Death card)?

Does the Two of Cups really present us with the image of a suicide pact between two women lying in a bed, or are they merely mixing and sharing one another's blood? A similar image appears on the Queen of Wands. The Four of Wands seems even more gruesome. I can only suppose that there is some narrative behind all this imagery that would help us grasp it as a series of stages in the vampire's development, but with merely the cards in hand, we only see perplexing and distressing depictions, that we are unable to properly contextualise. This deck certainly challenges and entirely reflects the darkness of the gothic.

We descend even deeper into gloom and darkness with the Savage Tarot. This is probably the darkest expressions of the tarot to date - and not just dark in concept but dark in printing! This is realised in photo-collage. Some images are very disturbing, depicting people broken down by drug abuse and violence and involved in BDSM or torture type activities. We will find here echoes of filmmaker David Lynch's imagery and even Francis Bacon's paintings. This deck was designed by an American artist called MichelleX, who specialises in photography and is especially drawn to images reflecting the goth lifestyle. Her photographic style is very developed and she certainly understands how to create powerful graphic effects. Her Savage Tarot reflects back to us a deeply disturbing world of violence, despair, gun-shiek, bondage, blood and extreme body piercing. There is a constant hint at BDSM activities, through the depiction of chains, and those strange gas-mask fetish wear. The photographs have been extensively manipulated by a computer graphics program to embed them in a textured, usually dark, space. On some figures the heads have been distorted and metamorphosed. The images require considerable contemplation to make out the details.



This is certainly a deep and well thought out tarot, but one that few will be able to resonate with.



The *Corneal Edema* tarot by John R Dybowski is a true goth tarot. It differs from the Manson tarot cards which have more a fixation on making political and social statements, and also from the Shadow Tarot, though it shares their general background. Dybowski's tarot is uncompromisingly goth in style, but it is definitely stylish. Thus he is perhaps closer to Leilah Wendell than to Manson or MichelleX. His imagery indeed



celebrates and positively explores a goth view of the world, filtered through the tarot imagery. The term 'corneal oedema' means an inflammation of the corneal part of the eye - the main symptom of which is blurring of vision and sometimes pain on looking at an object. So entirely in empathy with a goth view of the world this *Corneal Edema* Tarot is supposedly giving us a painful and distorted view, but in reality Dybowski's perspective is aesthetic and positive. This is a photographic collage deck and the photographs have been skilfully manipulated and placed within a textured frame. The tones have been shifted to sepia and one has the impression, when looking at a card, of gazing through a old window. The photographic tableaux that are the basis for the imagery are expressively posed, then collaged and given a surface texturing, that makes them look like aged photographs.