



## Tarot

by Andrew Matzner

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The tarot is a set of 78 cards with evocative imagery that is often used in fortune-telling. Italian in origin, tarot cards possess a lineage over five hundred years old. Today, one can find many different types of tarot card decks in both metaphysical and mainstream bookstores. Due to the rich allegorical symbolism found on each card, a tarot deck is an ideal tool not only for divination, but also for self-discovery, meditation, and intuitive work.

The traditional tarot deck (which greatly influenced modern decks) was somewhat heterosexist in nature, in that the archetype of "love" was depicted in terms of a male/female pairing. At the same time, other tarot images emphasized balance and even androgyny. Indeed, it has been argued that the philosophical message underpinning tarot imagery idealizes the combination of male and female energies and principles within a single person. However, it is only in recent years that a small number of artists have developed decks that are specifically aimed at lesbian, gay, and feminist audiences.

### History

Tarot cards were created in Northern Italy in the early fifteenth century, approximately fifty years after the introduction of playing cards into Europe via Muslim Spain. Used for a game that is the precursor to modern-day bridge (known in Italian first as *triumphi*, then later as *tarocchi*), the tarot deck consisted of four suits made up of numbered and court cards, much like other decks of the time. What made this new deck unique was the addition of 22 cards decorated with richly symbolic imagery.

Tarot became a popular pastime, and over the centuries the use of such cards spread throughout Europe (in France it was called *tarot*, the name that we use today). At the same time, the images depicted on the cards underwent changes as well. In particular, the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries saw the development of the Tarot of Marseilles, which became a commonly used deck.

Tarot decks began to be used for divinatory purposes beginning in the early eighteenth century, if not before. Occultists began claiming that the tarot was actually a compilation of wisdom that was ancient Egyptian in origin. These practitioners interpreted tarot cards using an esoteric framework that included the Kabala, Hermeticism, alchemy, numerology, and astrology.

Occult ideas and practices certainly influenced Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942) and Pamela Colman Smith (1878-1951), who created the *Waite-Smith Tarot*, which first appeared in 1909. This deck is significant because its popularity ensured that it would become the standard against which future tarot decks would be measured.

### GLBTQ Significance

Besides being a card game and a way to foretell the future, tarot cards have more recently also been used as psychological tools for self-exploration. Contemplation of the cards' provocative images can spark

intuitive insight concerning matters such as goals, problems, individual choices, and patterns of living. The pictures on cards that are chosen at random from a tarot deck serve as powerful metaphors that may offer new perspectives on a person's life.

In 1944, Aleister Crowley and Lady Frieda Harris published the *Thoth Tarot*, a highly influential divination system that foregrounded sexuality. Famous for its fantastic, surreal imagery, the *Thoth Tarot* brought sexuality of all kinds into the tarot philosophy.

A major figure in today's tarot community is Rachel Pollack, the author of a number of widely used books on tarot interpretation. A transsexual woman, Pollack is the creator of the female-centered *Shining Tribe* tarot deck. Pollack's writings are significant because she stresses the importance of androgyny as found in various tarot symbolism. Pollack cautions against interpreting tarot imagery strictly in terms of a heterosexist, male/female perspective.

Other decks that similarly emphasize a feminist viewpoint include the *Daughters of the Moon* (Ffiona Morgan), the *Wise Woman's Tarot* (Flash Silvermoon and Barbara Vogel), and the *New Amazon* (Billie Potts).

Tarot decks created by gay men and informed by a queer sensibility include *Cosmic Tribe* (Stevee Postman), *Light & Shadow* (Michael Goepferd), *Brotherhood Tarot* (Patric Stillman), and *Renaissance Tarot* (Brian Williams). A popular deck that directly focuses on the experiences of homosexual men is the *Gay Tarot* by Lee Bursten and Antonella Platano. The *Bapst-Hall Tarot* (Don Bapst and Link Hall) also highlights gay themes.

Some tarot decks address the traditionally heterosexual bias of the Lovers card. For example, the *Daughters of the Moon* deck provides two versions of this card: one with a male/female couple, another picturing two women. Likewise, the inclusive *Cosmic Tribe* deck has three separate Lovers cards.

## **Bibliography**

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