

# The URBAN TAROT



The  
URBAN  
TAROT



BY ROBIN SCOTT



A GUIDE TO THE DECK

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Made in China



A previous edition of The Urban Tarot was self-published by the artist in 2015.

Temperance from the Rider-Waite-Smith deck used with permission of U.S. Games Systems, Inc.

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# AN INTRODUCTION

Too often we are told that magic and wisdom belong only to the forgotten forests, the places untouched by human hands, and to ages long lost to memory.

I reject this idea. I look around my world, and I see the beauty, the wonder, the magic in the metropolis, the power under the pavement.

I created The Urban Tarot based upon the belief that the ideas and truths referred to by the Tarot are eternal and universal. Some of the images and symbols from traditional Tarot may no longer resonate with modern readers. The Urban Tarot is an attempt to reclaim the power of that old magic and bring it within the reach of the 21st century seeker of truth.

This guidebook is an attempt to share my thoughts and opinions, as the designer, on the cards of The Urban Tarot. It is my hope that it will prove helpful to those who plan to use the deck in readings, as well as to those simply looking for a more complete understanding of the series as art. Within, you will find explanations as to how I interpret each card, and some insights into the process by which each piece of art came about—why I made the choices that I did.

A significant portion of the text in this guide is adapted from a series of updates that were sent out to project backers and other followers over the course of the project's completion. The commentary you'll find within is often personal, which is only natural, as the creation of this deck has played a significant role in my life for well over a decade.

The deck began its life in 2003, during my senior year at Parsons School of Design. At the time, I was mostly unfamiliar with the Tarot, and I did not personally own a deck. I was commissioned, along with three other artists, to create a Tarot deck that was intended to be a tie-in product to a role-playing game. Although the original project fell through, I found myself drawn to the images of the Tarot as an illustrative challenge. Over the years, I often found myself wishing I could return to the project and see the deck completed.

In 2012, I ran a campaign on Kickstarter to raise funds to finally complete the deck. Hundreds of people came forward to support and be a part of the project. The campaign not only met its goal, but ended up raising much more than I had originally asked for. Humbled and grateful, I began the journey of completing all remaining cards, working on the series full-time for the next three years.

This deck's structure is based heavily on the Thoth Tarot, conceptualized by Aleister Crowley and painted by Lady Frieda Harris between 1938 and 1943. It uses, with few exceptions, the same card names as the Thoth deck, and has a similar emphasis on the elemental associations within the set. The deck also draws significant inspiration from the older Rider-Waite deck, originally published in 1910 and illustrated by the incomparable Pamela Colman Smith.

The meanings I assign to each card should be considered no more authoritative than anyone else's. The Tarot is a tradition with centuries of history, and this particular deck is but one small part of that long story. In creating it, I have drawn upon the work of many others, and found meanings through the lens of my own life and the world I live in. I encourage every seeker to do the same, finding their own individual truth in these cards. Your interpretations are ultimately as legitimate as my own.

Those who are familiar with the earlier decks and their associated magical traditions are encouraged to find correspondences in this deck that reference those older systems. Those who are new to the Tarot are encouraged to seek their own truths in the images contained here; to find resonances to their own life and to the world around them. All readers are encouraged to let their intuition be their guide, and to see the miraculous in the mundane.



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# A GUIDE TO THE SYMBOLS



**The Infinite** — an eternal loop that folds back endlessly upon itself. Used to represent the set of the Major Arcana, which together represents the continual journey each of us is on.



**Fire** — the element of passion, will, activity, aggression and spiritual drive. Represented by the suit of Wands, and by the Knights of each suit.



**Water** — the element of dreams, receptivity, emotions and relationships. Represented by the suit of Cups, and by the Queens of each suit.



**Air** — the element of rational thought, language, science and other pursuits of the intellect. Represented by the suit of Swords, and by the Princes of each suit.



**Earth** — the element of the physical world, material wealth, the body and all growing things. Represented by the suit of Disks, and by the Princesses of each suit.

## 0: THE FOOL

Our story of the Tarot begins with the Fool, the first card of the Major Arcana, but also a bit separate from the rest. We number it zero. In a way, it is not quite the beginning of the journey, so much as it is the feeling we have before we take that very first step.

The Fool represents that part of us that is willing to make a leap without knowing where it will lead; the childlike part of us that is too naive to recognize the impossible, and will not see reason. It is the poor traveler, who does not know where the road will take him, but sets out to see the world with a glad heart.

I have always felt a very personal connection to this card and what it represents. I strive to live a life unburdened by fear, open to the possibilities before me. When asked to describe my approach to life, I often think of the Fool, and simply say, "I jump off cliffs."

To quote one of my favorite stories by Neil Gaiman:

*It is sometimes a mistake to climb; it is always a mistake never even to make the attempt. If you do not climb, you will not fall. This is true. But is it that bad to fail, that hard to fall?...Sometimes, when you fall, you learn to fly.*

I modeled for this card myself, very early on in the project, by standing on the ledge of my apartment building, while a friend held the loop of my belt from behind, to keep me from slipping to my death on the icy ledge. My childhood dog, Oreo, was thankfully not there at the time.

The symbol on my T-shirt, a null symbol, was originally intended to be a reference to The Zero Movement, a gaming project I began The Urban Tarot in connection with.

**Model: Robert Scott  
Completed in January 2004**

# I: THE MAGE

The Major Arcana begins in earnest with the Mage, a card of infinite potential and promise. The Mage represents will: the will to create, the will to succeed, and the will to make a change in your life for the better. In this, it is truly the universal first step.

The Mage sees the world as it is, and makes a choice to act. The magic he will wield has no form yet, only possibility. There is no arcane trick to what he does, and his arts are known to all of us if we choose to use them. To create magic means no more than to affect the world around you, to create meaning where there was none. We create magic through our internal beliefs, and through our connections with others. We create magic with our minds and with our hands.

The Mage has gathered his materials before him: symbols of the four elements as represented by a cup, a sword, a disk, and a wand. Thus, in a way, the Mage is also the first card of each of the four suits, as in him we see the combined spark of the four aces in a harmonious unity.

I credit my model, Isaac Everett, for the suggestion to depict my Mage as a musician. Isaac is a very talented professional composer himself, and I've been very lucky to collaborate with him on a number of projects. Music is a kind of magic I find personally utterly mystifying and miraculous. It is an amazing thing to see a series of arcane marks on a page transformed, by way of an instrument and a performer, into an indescribable experience with the power to convey feelings in an abstract but universal form.

It is interesting to note that, as this is one of the earliest cards I completed for this set, the technology depicted (the CRT monitor, the CD) already appears out of date by the time I write these words.

**Model: Isaac Everett  
Completed in June 2003**

## II: THE HIGH PRIESTESS

The High Priestess is often seen as a contrasting card to the Mage, a feminine counterpart to the previous card's masculine aspect. We will see throughout the Tarot that we are encouraged to understand all things as part of a balance. If there are times when it is necessary for us to summon the will to act, so too are there times when it is necessary for us to stop and listen.

The High Priestess is concerned with receiving and understanding that which the world is sending our way. She is the Yin to the Mage's Yang, creating magic through intuition rather than will, seeking greater truths by drinking from the inner font of the unconscious. She urges us to go deeper, to accept mysterious wisdom, and to trust in yourself. She reminds us to have patience, and to give time for quiet reflection.

There is a concept in Taoism called "wu wei," which is generally translated as "action without action" or "effortless doing." We may have difficulty with this idea, because too often we are taught that action is always positive and inaction is always negative. In truth, inaction is sometimes the most powerful and positive choice we can make in our lives.

*The softest thing in the universe  
Overcomes the hardest thing in the universe.  
That without substance can enter  
where there is no room.  
Hence I know the value of non-action.  
Teaching without words and work without  
doing  
Are understood by very few.  
— from the Tao Te Ching*

**Model: Blair Kamage  
Completed in May 2007**

### III: THE EMPRESS

The Empress is Mother, in every sense.

She is a symbol of the highest ideals of what we think of as feminine: loving, merciful, nurturing. She accepts without judgment.

She is a symbol of the softer side of authority, a parental figure who guides and shapes with care. She teaches us compassion and trust with a gentle hand.

She is a symbol of life, and the creation of life. She is the Great Mother, the mother of all. She is the guardian of fertility and maternity. She is Mother Nature, Mother Earth, the Mother Goddess. She is abundant and endless. We are nourished through her.

And she is simply Mom, real and human and impossibly powerful all the same. Before we know words, before everything, we know her face and her voice.

There is something in this piece of my own distant memories of infancy, of the warm orange stripes of nearly forgotten kitchen wallpaper. An antique refrigerator and plastic laminate countertop. The warm tones of late 70's design and of the early morning sun. The stars that orbit her head like a crown are in the eyes of her child; she is the center of the universe.

**Model: Crystal Huff  
Completed in March 2007**

## IV: THE EMPEROR

The Emperor is Father, in every sense.

He is a symbol of the highest ideals of what we think of as masculine: strong, wise, just. He is steadfast in his protection, and is unswerving in his resolve.

He is a symbol of the harder side of authority, a parental figure who holds us to a higher standard of ethics and enforces the rule of law. He teaches us responsibility and morality with a firm and measured hand.

He is a symbol of social order, and the power of civilization. He is God the Father, the King, Lord of the Universe. He is the guardian of order and stability, protector against chaos and fear. He stands fast against the worst that the world has to offer, and is unmoved. He keeps us safe, and teaches us how to be strong in turn.

And he is simply Dad, real and human and impossibly powerful all the same. Dad, who holds us up high and tells us not to fear, who will always be there if we fall.

I had my own father model for this piece, and let me say that it was a difficult thing to call up that authoritarian glower on his face. My dad is a man much more likely to be sporting a wide and mischievous grin than a cold glare. I asked him to read sections of Churchill's speeches from 1940 while gesturing forcefully to get him in the right frame of mind.

I have depicted him as Mayor of New York, in what I imagined as a combination of Michael Bloomberg, Winston Churchill, and Balon Greyjoy. I see him standing proudly on the East River, giving a speech under the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge in the midst of Hurricane Sandy's pummeling stormfront, resolutely refusing to surrender to Mother Nature's fury.

**Model: Elliot Grossman  
Completed in September 2013**

## V: THE HIEROPHANT

In the course of life, we find ourselves in many kinds of institutions. There is the family, in which we learn how to trust our parents' judgment until we can judge for ourselves. There is school, where we learn to listen to the wisdom of our teachers and open ourselves to the wider world of knowledge. There are religious institutions, both those we are brought up within and those we seek out for ourselves. They give our lives structure; they teach us and support us when we are in need.

The Hierophant represents the power of the organization, and what it means to be part of something larger than yourself. It is about community, and trusting the structure of a hierarchy. There is both light and darkness in this card, as any organization we give ourselves to can just as easily lead us into fulfillment and understanding as into dogmatic intolerance and ignorance. A glass stands half-full on the desk as a reminder of that balance.

Although I am not a Christian, I've made use of several symbols of the Catholic church in this piece. The three circles are an oft-used representation of the Trinity, which is in a way the simplest kind of self-contained hierarchy. The staff leaning against the wall is a combination of a bishop's crook and the triple cross of the papal staff. The translucent image of a dove is inspired by depictions of the Annunciation in medieval art.

My mother comes from a large Irish Catholic family, and so I feel a certain familial fondness for the aesthetics and pomp of the church. I also have none of the resentful memories of being dragged to Mass on Sunday morning, or having to guiltily recall my sins in confessional. I recognize the power that the church has had, and continues to have, both to promote great good in the world, and also to foster intense bigotry and hate. The good does not erase the bad, but neither does the bad invalidate the good.

**Model: Richard Silvera**  
**Completed in July 2003**

## VI: THE LOVERS

We have already seen a great deal of dualism in the cards, barely six steps into our journey through the Major Arcana. Mage and High Priestess, Emperor and Empress. Even the Hierophant reminds us of a balance between light and dark. Here with the Lovers, we see those opposites united and intertwined. Diminishing neither, they are melded into one through the power of their love. Male and female joined, they are more than ceremony and tradition, more than biology. They represent an ideal of unity between opposites, the harmony of Yin and Yang.

Because this piece is so personal to me, I have some rather strong feelings about it. The photo I used as reference for this image is from my own wedding in 2006. My wife and I had a small ceremony in our apartment, in which we lit a candle together to symbolize the union of our lives. We did not hire a professional photographer, so the only photos we have are from friends and relatives who snapped pictures of the event. As such, this piece is what we usually think of as our “official” wedding image, and it’s the only piece of my art we have hanging in our bedroom.

Of course, I was a different person in so many ways when my wife and I first spoke our vows. I will probably never be able to grow a beard like that again, nor fit comfortably into a tuxedo. Our marriage is less a union of opposites these days, and more a harmony of shared experience and a shared journey that is ours and ours alone. There have been many kisses since, and I hope there will be many more to come, but this kiss will always be symbolic of the moment when we first agreed that we were stronger together.

**Model: Amy & Robert Scott  
Completed in May 2007**

## VII: THE CHARIOT

It takes more than merely wishing to reach your destination. Every road has obstacles; every traveler will face hardship. The Chariot card reminds us how to confront the obstacles in our lives—by rolling forward, never stopping. It is about having the will, the determination, and the strength to overcome whatever life puts in our way. It is about gaining ground when the universe seems set on making you fail. It is about committing yourself to building something from nothing, and accepting nothing short of success.

When I asked my friend Tse Wei to model for this card back in 2007, I couldn't have known how appropriate a choice he was. Starting in late 2009, Tse Wei and his wife, Diana, set out to turn their passion for cooking into a restaurant. Within a year of opening, they were named Restaurant of the Year in the press, and received a great deal of well-earned acclaim. And they faced some sizable obstacles, including a very literal Chariot in the form of a car that drove through their front window and did some serious damage. But the pair have overcome everything that has come their way, and have since continued their journey and opened up three new successful establishments. I am continually in awe of their determination and drive—never satisfied with what they have already done, they look forward to what they can accomplish next.

I did not actually ask Tse Wei to pose crouched on top of a taxi. The building behind him is the First Baptist Church of New York, whose beautiful and unusual facade happens to be across the street from my apartment.

**Model: Tse Wei Lim  
Completed in May 2007**

## VIII: JUSTICE

What is just? What is fair? What is right?

Crowley preferred the title “Adjustment” in the Thoth Tarot, because he claimed that “nature is not just” and thus Justice has no place in the set of trumps. I agree with him that Justice is a human idea, but it is a vital one, one of the core ideals that we build our society upon. We recognize that life is, ultimately, not fair. Many suffer who have done nothing to deserve it, and many go unpunished who have done great harm. We stand by the ideal that we, as civilized people, can do better than that.

*We hold these truths to be self-evident,  
that all men are created equal, that they  
are endowed by their Creator with certain  
unalienable Rights, that among these are Life,  
Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

We are fragile and fallible human beings, prone to irrationality and prejudice. We look to the rule of law in the hope that collectively we can be more Just than we are as individuals. Through the system of the courts, we seek to weed out our human failings and arrive at a balanced, clear, and ethical judgment. Then we look to our law enforcement officers to mete out that judgment with an impartial hand. We demand that Justice should be blind to who we are as people, and treat every person as equal.

Of course, perfect Justice is a hard ideal to live by, and harder still to find in the real world. Our courts are imperfect, prone to come down harder on those who can least stand up for themselves, and to protect those who are already in power. The ideal of Justice is worth holding high, all the same. Because she is blind, we must remember that Justice needs the guidance of love and mercy when she wields her sword of truth.

**Model: Jessica Hammer  
Completed in July 2004**

## IX: THE HERMIT

There are times in your life when the only answers that matter are the ones you can find for yourself. There are questions that you can only ask to an empty room. No matter how much you enjoy the company of others, there are places you need to go where nobody else can follow.

The Hermit is a card about solitude, and the wisdom you can find when you take the time to isolate yourself from other people and can listen to yourself think. Living the life of the Hermit can be lonely and bitter, but the wisdom and guidance he offers should not be ignored. He reminds us to listen to that inner voice that tells us when those around us have lost their way. With his tiny light, he illuminates the path through the darkest places.

This card has a correspondence with the High Priestess, as it is through the Hermit's quiet isolation that we can learn to accept the Priestess's deeper insight. He is connected as well to the Moon, which rules the darker aspects of our psyche. Like the jackal that appears on the Moon card, the Hermit is accompanied by a symbol of the journey into the underworld in the form of Cerberus, the three-headed hound of Hell. The Hermit has tamed the beast, and so can pass beyond the darkest gates and return unscathed. With his guidance, we can find those places within ourselves we fear to explore, and bring light into them.

It is important to remember, though, that we must still return from those dark places if we are to live a healthy life. Too long an isolation from the light of society is damaging to anyone, and the Hermit can also sometimes help to remind us that we have indulged in our solitary self-reflection for too long.

**Model: Chris Hall  
Completed in June 2003**

## X: THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

As we considered Justice just recently in our journey, we remarked upon one universal and well-known truth: life is not fair. And fate, it is often said, is fickle.

Like every cheesy carnival game you will pass in Coney Island, life often comes down to a simple game of chance. A rigged game sometimes, certainly—but never discount the power of fate to throw the unexpected your way, good or ill. Sometimes you go up, sometimes you go down, but the wheel never stops turning.

The Wheel of Fortune represents the force of random chance in the universe. It is the sudden windfall and the unexpected tragedy, the stroke of impossibly good luck and the cruel and ironic accident. No matter how well we plan, or how hard we try, we can never be fully prepared for what may happen. Neither a positive nor a negative card in itself, the Wheel of Fortune is the simple reality of living in a constantly changing world. It is up to us to choose how we will face that change.

Will we rage against the unfair universe, or blame the powers that be for their cruel humor at our expense? Will we submit to what comes with a grim fatalism that expects only the worst? When good luck comes our way, do we accept it with grace and humility, or do we take credit for gains we did nothing to earn?

I visited Coney Island in the off-season to shoot reference pictures for this piece, when it was cold and empty. The fortune teller's shop is shut; we rarely get to see which way the wheel will turn before it does. There is a dark and uncertain sky overhead, with powerful storms brewing. I've enthroned a Sphinx, an old symbol of mystery and cunning, on the front of the famous Wonder Wheel.

**Completed in March 2007**

## XI: ∫ TRENTH

There are many kinds of strength. There is strength of arms, that helps us overcome our enemies. There is strength of the heart that helps us overcome pain. There is strength that runs rampant, and strength that holds firm.

This card has sometimes been named Fortitude, or Passion, or Lust, but I prefer the simple title of Strength. Strength is the lion, fierce and mighty, straining to break free. Strength is also the woman who tames that lion with gentle force, overcoming ferocity with calm determination and resolve. The Strength card acknowledges that we have deeper drives that can rage out of control, but it also reminds us that we can harness those drives and make them work for us.

In my life, there is nobody whose strength I have more admired than Jessica Hammer. Both brilliant and deeply ethical, I have never seen her once back down from what she knew to be right, nor fail to act or speak out when faced with injustice or inequality. As a teacher, a mentor, a speaker, a researcher, and an invaluable friend, it is a rare gift to be able to benefit from her strength and charisma. It was her connections that led me to begin this series back in 2002, and it was her suggestion that led me to launch a Kickstarter to fund the completion of this series a decade later. I'm not sure what my life would be like today if Jessica had not been a part of it, and I cannot imagine anyone else being the model for this card.

The two famous marble lions that stand guard outside the main branch of the New York Public Library were named Patience and Fortitude by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in the 1930s, for qualities he felt New Yorkers would need to survive the economic depression. I've depicted Jessica here wrestling Fortitude, who sits to the north of the Fifth Avenue entrance.

**Model: Jessica Hammer  
Completed in May 2007**

## XII: THE HANGED MAN

Sometimes seeing things clearly requires finding a whole new perspective.

The Hanged Man is tied up in old symbols and somewhat arcane ideas. He is often associated with the story of Odin, father of the Norse gods, who hung himself for nine days from the branches of the great world tree in pursuit of greater wisdom. Isolated and on the edge of death, the Allfather stared downwards into the darkness until the abyss revealed its secrets.

Although it seems tied up in sacrifice and death, the Hanged Man is not as grim a card as it may seem. The card tells us that moving forward sometimes means giving up, learning sometimes requires unlearning, and living a better life sometimes means accepting the death of who you think you are. If all your roads seem to lead the wrong way, the Hanged Man suggests turning the map upside down.

I depicted my Hanged Man as someone who has come from a rich corporate life. Inverted from the underside of a girder, he lets his worldly wealth fall out of his outturned pockets. With a beatific smile, he watches all that he formerly valued spill away, seeking a wisdom that is more valuable.

My model, Joe Curro, is himself both a very thoughtful man with personal ties to pagan spirituality and Norse tradition, and occasionally a very sharp-looking suit-wearing corporate employee. In his role as part-time minister, he was also the man who officiated at my wedding in 2006.

Model: Joe Curro  
Completed in July 2003

## XIII: DEATH

The Death card is about change. Sometimes a painful change (and what changes are not painful?), but one that is often necessary in order to allow new things to take root and grow. It has implications of rebirth and renewal as well as of endings. Death isn't always the enemy, as much as we want to cast the Grim Reaper as a villain. Sometimes when things end, or people pass on...it is simply time.

With this card, I wanted to create an image that immediately caused a sense of discomfort. Even when death is necessary, even when it is anticipated or wished for, it is never comfortable to think about. This is especially true in our modern world where we are more removed from death and dying than generations past have been. In the urban context, death happens most often in a hospital, under the care of doctors and beneath harsh fluorescent lights. Doctors spend their career trying to save lives, but they are also often the people standing at our sides when life ends.

Death has no face, of course. A merciless black spot hides its visage from our view. I resisted the temptation to represent Death with the classic grinning skull, as that felt just too easy, too expected. Spooky and morbid perhaps, but no more disquieting than the Halloween decorations you see all over in the fall.

I sought to indicate with this card how death can lead to life, and it occurred to me that the perfect modern metaphor for that cycle comes with being an organ donor. Because there is a little heart on my state ID, there's a very real chance that if I die unexpectedly, my organs may go to help someone else live. That's a very real kind of reincarnation and rebirth.

The insects on the wall are dung beetles, or scarabs, a classic Egyptian symbol of rebirth and immortality. And the scarabs are of course crawling to a clock without hands which should be a fairly obvious symbol of endless time/timelessness. As it says in Ecclesiastes, "*No one knows when their hour will come.*"

**Model: Abigail Estes  
Completed in May 2012**

## XIV: ART

Older decks call this card Temperance, which was once a common term for the practice of mixing wine with water. Pamela Colman Smith's beautiful line work from the Rider-Waite-Smith deck\* features somewhat centrally here in the form of a mural on the wall. The most common interpretation of that card relates to moderation in opposition to extremism, seeking a middle road, and mixing your anger and passion with calm and rationality as water is added to wine.

With the Thoth deck, Crowley saw that one could mix and combine opposing elements—Water and Fire, red and white—and rather than diminishing both or canceling out their energy, it was possible to create from them something wholly new, with power unique to its elemental parts. The Thoth deck calls this trump Art, and so do I. It speaks about taking opposing pieces and finding a way to harmonize them, mix them, combine them into a new and unique whole. '*Solve et coagula*' as the old alchemists say—dissolve and combine.

I see what I've done with this deck as a kind of creative alchemy. I've taken elements from what has come before, the old and the new, ancient symbols and modern architecture, and sought to combine them in ways that bring those elements greater power through juxtaposition. Art, as any artist can tell you, never grows in a vacuum. Creating new work is as much a process of learning to see, absorb, and process what others have done as it is about creating something new from whole cloth.

I make no illusions about what I've borrowed from those who've come before me, and I try to give credit to those who contributed to the pieces I put my signature on. As much as I am a creator, so too I am an alchemist, taking a pinch of this and a dab of that, putting mysterious components together in a pot and waiting to see what emerges.

*\*Courtesy of U.S. Games*

**Model: Chandra Jessee  
Completed in April 2015**

## XV: THE DEVIL

The Devil card represents the ways we are enslaved by the darkest parts of ourselves. It represents how our own hedonism, fear, self-doubt, and laziness can keep us in chains, holding us back from what we really want and keeping us from achieving what we're capable of. We all have addictions we know we should break but do not. At one time or another, we all worship at the Devil's altar and do things that we know we shouldn't.

There is no need, in my mind, to equate the harm we do to ourselves and to others with some larger concept of "sin." It is enough to recognize that we have fallen into a trap that is unhealthy, and to begin taking steps toward a healthier path. Neither is it particularly useful for us to ladle more guilt upon ourselves for failing in the first place. That self-destructive guilt is often part of what keeps us helplessly in chains.

This is one of the first pieces where I started to experiment with mixing in other media, using directly drawn or painted elements along with collaged textures to get a more immediate, tangible feel. I had a lot of fun, adding in all those little dirty bathroom scribbles and stick figures around the scene.

The art direction I gave my friend Anthony when he modeled for this shot was basically to look down at me with utter disdain and arrogance. I think he did a terrific job with it, and this continues to be one of my favorite images in the set. Over the years, I've had Anthony model as Jesus Christ, as a superhero, as a wizard, and any number of other things, but I think I'll always think of him most fondly as my Devil.

**Model: Anthony Bamonte**  
**Completed in May 2008**

## XVI: THE TOWER

This is the second version of the 16th trump that I've illustrated for this deck. I finished the first piece in September of 2012. At that time I couldn't imagine depicting anything other than the tragedy that had come to my city on another September morning, 11 years previously. A singular moment of fire and horror. I called it The Towers. It felt like an ugly, open wound, but it also felt like the only possible image for the deck at the time.

Things have changed a great deal in only a few years. We are not the same city we once were, not the same nation, not the same world. Now, in the summer of 2018, we are scared like never before. We are angry, and overwhelmed, and uncertain. We do not know who to trust. We do not know when they will come for us or those we care about. Our country is not the country we thought it was. The rules are not the rules. There are no norms. This. Is. Not. Normal.

There is a feeling that hangs over us all. It is The Crisis that we are in now, assaulting us every day with new disturbing reports, new atrocities, new lies. It is a slowly rising tide, swallowing us up, day by day, inch by inch. It seems like everything we once depended on, everything we have built, will soon slip below the waves and vanish.

I came back to this card to create something that spoke of today's crisis, the disaster happening outside my window right now. This card has always been the face of disaster, of things gone terribly, terribly wrong. Sometimes it seems there is nothing we can do but bear witness to the horror. We hold close to those we love, and hope that we will be strong enough to do what we must, to save who we can.

We fear that we are not enough to stop the tide.

This tower is inspired by a very real tower in my city. Black and gold, ornate and gaudy, ugly in every way. I'd prefer not to name it here, but its name appears on this page all the same.

**Completed in June 2018**

## XVII: THE STAR

The Star is the card of hope in the Major Arcana. It is the dream just out of view, too far off to see, but powerful enough to guide you and give you strength. Someday, somehow. Somewhere out there.

And what do we do, when we honor our hopes and our dreams? We pour out our love, not knowing if it will come back to us. We give forward the best part of ourselves, and use it to nurture a vision that may never come to be. We do not question whether it's all worth it. Hope asks us to give, and to let our kindness and generosity flow like water. We pour forth love onto our children, and we hope they will become better than we are. We pour love into our work, and hope that it is valued by others. We pour out love to strangers, and hope that we make the world a little better by it. We look up, and we pour out from a vessel that is never emptied.

The setting is in front of the Bowery Mission, a faith-based charity, homeless shelter, and soup kitchen. I tried to capture the feel of the front facade of the building, with its signature red doors and stained glass windows. In the background, we can see the twinkling lights of the city skyline, and of the night sky overhead. I wanted to place the viewer literally in the gutter, looking up to the light of hope and promise. It was a tricky perspective to capture, but I'm pretty pleased with the results.

I was glad to bring back the shattered glass texture I used a few times in my earliest cards. I like the way it *feels* like stained glass without really *looking* like stained glass, if that makes any sense.

**Model: Marie Brennan  
Completed in March 2013**

## XVIII: THE MOON

I set out to make this a creepy card, no question. The Moon is about secrets that we keep from ourselves, and the mysteries of the subconscious mind. It is about the world of dreams, and of nightmares as well. So this card is about fear, but it is nonetheless not a “negative” card, any more than Death is. When we delve into the things we’d prefer not to face, it’s natural to be afraid. Still, it may be worth the trip down into the sewers of our mind now and again. Who knows what we may find down there?

The overall theme of my design for this card is urban legend. There are so many strange and creepy stories about New York, and many of them involve the vast and unmappable underground networks of old sewers and subway tunnels. Forgotten tunnels, buried treasures, ghosts, and mutants. The albino alligators that supposedly live down there are, of course, well known. I absolutely love this stuff.

I once took a tour of the long-abandoned Cobble Hill Tunnel, purportedly the oldest subway tunnel in the world. Long thought destroyed, it was found and dug up a few years ago, under Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. It was an amazing experience, and that dark passage partly inspired the look of this card.

The Moon also has strong connections with the underworld, meaning the lands occupied by the dead. Death is a journey into mystery and the unknown, much as a dream, but from which one does not return. This card has been associated with Anubis, the Egyptian guide to the afterlife. The jackal-headed god was an intimidating figure but he was also a kind one; he was there to hold your hand after you had passed, and walk with you to the end of your journey. The jackal in my piece is a nod to that old psychopomp.

**Model: Tanja Bara Muncey  
Completed in August 2012**

## XIX: THE SUN

The Sun is life, hope, and clarity. It is the light that touches everything, warms it, and reveals it for what it truly is. While the Moon is a card of mystery and fear, the Sun completely dispels all confusion. Everything suddenly becomes clear, and so simple that a child could explain it to you. When we are young and innocent, we can speak black and white truths without hesitation because we don't yet know the many shades of grey. Sometimes you need a child's perspective to realize that all the complexities in your life can simply be swept away and discarded. Not everything needs to be worried over. Sometimes you just need to go outside in the sunshine and let the world be okay again.

Of course we can easily see negatives to this approach. If we cling to our childlike wonderment, we are liable never to gain more than a surface understanding of things. We risk ignoring complexity and deeper meaning. Still, I think it's always worth remembering to take time in your life to enjoy simple things, to play, and to run in the sunshine.

The location I used as reference here is Union Square Park, where the model and his mom and I spent a lovely afternoon. In reality, the statue in the background is a robed figure of Abraham Lincoln, which I've replaced by a Greek statue of Apollo, often closely associated with the Sun and its various attributes of clarity and understanding. The golden god brought his gift of order and mathematical precision to the arts, often expressed through that perfect divine proportion, the golden ratio. It is not by casual accident that many of the images in this deck approach quite closely the proportions of a golden rectangle. If this card had a smell, and I like to imagine it does, it would smell like the yellow crayons I scribbled fiercely in making the sky.

**Model: Tobin**  
**Completed in December 2012**

## XX: THE AEON

The Aeon is about seeing yourself and your life as part of a greater cycle of time. It is about looking at your place in history, and trying to see yourself through the eyes of those who came before, and those who are yet to come. In many traditional Tarot decks, the 20th card is called “Judgment” and it shows an image of the dead rising from their graves on Judgment Day. The card is a call to take a look at what you have done with your time on this planet, and to ask yourself how you will face your Creator when that time is over. In this instance, I much prefer to use the connotations of Crowley’s Aeon, in which we see time as a cycle that continues perhaps into infinity, and we are judged not by divine justice but by what we leave behind for generations yet to come.

I realized that this card had to be about Ellis Island, where over 12 million people first came through into our country. Stepping onto that island is very much like touching a piece of your own history; chances are good that if you are an American, one of your ancestors stepped off a boat onto that shore, perhaps with nothing but the clothes on their back and a bag in their hands. The wall pictured here is the American Immigration Wall of Honor, a permanent monument on the island with lists of thousands of names inscribed across steel plates. The section you see here is only a tiny fragment of the whole—the plates form a series of enormous concentric rings on one side of the island.

A couple of notes on details in this card: this is one of the few times I’ve used photos of the place I’m depicting as the basis for some of the textures. The names in the image are in fact from a photo of the monument. The sidewalk texture is taken from a sample of the original walls preserved in the Ellis Island museum, carrying scratches like physical memories of those who have passed through the building. In the skyline in the background, you can see the immense silhouette of the Freedom Tower, still under construction at the time this piece was completed.

**Model: Kaitlin Heller  
Completed in September 2013**

## XXI: THE UNIVERSE

This is the last of the Major Arcana, and it completes the journey we began with the Fool. We started as naive wanderers, unsure of what lay ahead of us but eager to begin the adventure. Now we have experienced both the world within, and the world without. We have seen it all, fully absorbed the truths we have learned, and have come to a harmonious synthesis. We are finally at peace with the universe and with ourselves. At the end of a long journey, we find ourselves once more right where we began: comfortable in the knowledge that we truly know nothing, and eager to see where the road takes us next.

My wife Amy is the star of this Universe, as she is the center of mine; my entire world orbits around her. While I stood calmly at the precipice of fortune as the Fool, Amy strides confidently onward and upward into the cosmos. Below her stretches the sprawling skyline of my city, the world I've lived in my whole life. Growing vines and grasses push upwards through the concrete landscape, the endless movement of the living Earth. She is surrounded by a golden crown of laurels, for triumph. The great steel eagle head she is walking off of is one of four very distinctive gargoyles that grace the 61st floor of the Chrysler Building. Sitting atop the eagle's head is our cat Amelia, who passed away a little over a year before I created this piece, but is still fondly remembered in our home. A symbolic counterpoint to the dog who stood by me as the Fool.

High overhead, the International Space Station is just barely visible against a fiery image of the Milky Way (courtesy of NASA), a connection to our larger universe. "As above, so below" is a very old idea in magic, and it's worth repeating here. Remember that each of us is a complex and wondrous universe unto ourselves. We look to the stars above in order to better map the journey within, we look within to make sense of the infinite wonder of creation.

**Model: Amy Scott  
Completed in May 2015**

## THE ACE OF WANDS

The Ace represents the element of Fire in its most pure and primitive form. It's about passion, will, and idealism. That fire is the fuel that drives our spirit; it tells us to step up, to speak out, to make a difference. The fire of the Ace isn't a solid idea yet, just raw potential energy. That energy becomes developed, expressed, and then overexpressed through the later numbers, but at first it's all light and possibility.

I like to think of each of the four suits as representing a ten-part story, each a different kind of progression, with its own ups and downs along the way. The suit of Wands is the story of a social movement, an ideal that spreads and gains power as others take up its banner. We see the first part of that story here, before our movement even has a name, as the fire of the Ace provides us with the will to make a stand for the better.

I've overlaid the wand I designed for this suit over an image of the Statue of Liberty's torch. It seemed basically perfect, as a living part of New York that is both an image of literal fire as well as an instantly recognizable symbol of hope and promise. When I created this card, I saw that I had been moving in an increasingly tight and representative direction with my work, but for this piece I wanted to return to some of that simple, bold geometry I'd used in some of my earlier work. Throughout the series, I've tried to maintain that careful balance between pure representation and symbol—the dimensionality and perspective of a photograph, and the flatness of a collage.

**Completed in May 2012**



## 2: DOMINION

Dominion is a word with some interesting connotations. The Two of Wands is about taking the raw energy of the Ace, and turning it toward the will to succeed—or perhaps the will to dominate others. The fire has changed from an uncontrolled flame into a focused tool, but it could as easily become a weapon.

Our movement has a name now, and it has gained some initial traction. We have set aside other concerns, and made our new cause a priority. We suspect that we may need to make some sacrifices to reach our goals, but believe that our righteous aims make them wholly justified.

This card depicts an equestrian statue of Teddy Roosevelt that stands outside the American Museum of Natural History, just a few blocks from my apartment on the Upper West Side. It depicts President Roosevelt heroically astride his horse, flanked by two shirtless men apparently carrying his luggage for him. (I understand they were intended to appear as his guides.) One is Native American and the other is African.

Once you pay attention to it, the intended message seems to be a lot less about the President, and a lot more about which group of people is in charge here in America. So I decided to take the reference photo from an angle that completely obscured Mr. President and instead highlighted his majestic steed's impressive undercarriage.

The card's primary color is the white travertine of Ancient Rome and of Washington, D.C.

**Completed in May 2012**

### 3: VIRTUE

The Three of Wands represents the next step along the realization of an idea that began with the Ace. Here, the will to dominate and succeed has been paired with a sense of responsibility and a more complete understanding of what ends power can be put towards. The reckless energy of Dominion is tempered by a better understanding of how our actions affect others and the world at large.

Our movement has gained followers, and they stand united proudly in defense of their ideals. We continue to strive for change, knowing that we are stronger when we work together and in harmony with our community.

I chose to represent the Fire Department for this card, as it encapsulated nicely the idea of virtuous and directed action towards a worthwhile goal, as well as being very clearly associated with the element of Fire. While researching materials for this card, I found out that the New York City Fire Department's 3rd Hook and Ladder company were among the first responders to the attacks on September 11, 2001. Most of that company lost their lives on that day, sacrificing themselves to protect others. Captain Patrick "Paddy" Brown and his men were last reported on the 40th floor of the north tower. The company's fire truck was damaged beyond repair by the building's collapse, and the ladder apparatus was eventually interred, 70 feet below ground, in the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero.

**Completed in May 2012**



## 4: COMPLETION

The Four of Wands is about the end of a job well done, an intellectual effort carried out to completion and the achievement of a greater level of understanding. It is also, in a sense, only a stepping stone toward later cards in the suit of Fire; like graduation, it is as much a beginning as it is an end.

Our movement has reached an established milestone. We have a website, flyers, a written manifesto of our aims and how we will reach them. Our road ahead is clear, and we are prepared to begin the work of making an impact on the larger world. We have the optimism of youth, and the knowledge and drive we need to move forward.

This card was distinctly my wife's idea, perhaps inspired by the legions of happy graduates we saw in the neighborhood around the time I created the art. The robes are in Columbia University blue, and the statue behind them is the bronze sculpture of Alma Mater, who sits on the steps in front of the Low Library. If you look closely, there are torches on either side of her throne representing *Sapientia* (Wisdom) and *Doctrina* (Teaching).

**Completed in June 2012**

## 5: STRIFE

The Five of Wands, like all the fives of the Tarot, is about shaking up the static complacency of the fours. In the Wands, Completion leads to Strife—competition, contest, battle, different factions clashing with each other. It's easy to see the negatives of the card, but there are positives as well—competition and strife can lead us to better ourselves, to overcome and grow. Eventually, that competition will lead us to Victory with the Six. But first, we must fight to defend our position.

Our movement has, of course, encountered resistance in its drive to make a difference. No matter how righteous your cause or how good your idea, there will always be those who will have a different point of view.

Completing the art for this card was—well, a struggle, appropriately enough. First, I had to struggle to get the reference I needed, which took two different photo shoots. Then I gathered reference at a sports bar that I ended up basically throwing out. And I spent an inordinate amount of time fiddling with those tiny depictions of Fenway Park and Yankee Stadium in the TV screens at the top.

I thought the relation to sports, and baseball specifically, was a strong one. If you look at the Rider-Waite-Smith version of this card, you'll see five men, each in a different brightly-colored outfit, swinging long sticks at each other. Wands, sticks, bats. Same difference.

**Models: Elliot Gerard & Kate Bunnell  
Completed in July 2012**



## 6: VICTORY

More than the simple Completion we reached with the Four, the Six of Wands represents the end of a hard-won struggle. The Four had not seen trouble, had not yet faced opposition. The Six has met that opposition head-on and has come out proudly on top.

The social movement we began with the Ace is now an established force for good in the world. We have proven ourselves through sweat and blood, and have achieved real change. From here we look forward; we can choose to rest on our laurels, or we can maintain our momentum and go farther than we had ever imagined when we began our race.

I felt the NYC Marathon was a good match for this card—a long, grueling race with a clear finish line at the end. The figure is based specifically on Derartu Tulu, who became the first Ethiopian woman to win the marathon back in 2009. The card's colors are inspired by the Ethiopian flag. The actual ribbon she broke had the ING logo across it, since they sponsored the event, but I naturally didn't want to include that. However, the logo does have a lion in it, which reminded me that this card is associated with the sign for Leo. So I created a pattern using that zodiac symbol across the ribbon.

Particularly observant New Yorkers may point out that the Marathon crosses the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge at the very beginning, rather than at the end of its 26-mile route. This is true, but I really loved the image of the bridge in the background, and the shady tree-lined road of Central Park wouldn't have had the right feel at all.

**Completed in June 2012**

## 7: VALOR

This card speaks truth to power. It is the voice of the little guy with a hopeless cause, who simply won't shut up. It's standing on a soapbox and yelling louder than the people shouting you down. It is standing up against overwhelming odds, when all sane advice says to sit down. Valor is the card of protest; like all the Wands, to some degree, it is infused with the spirit of righteous passion, of moral strength and courage.

Our movement has gained followers, and achieved real victory, but there are always greater battles. Eventually, our cause will have to face those who have entrenched power, those whose resources are greater and will not easily bow to change. Valor teaches us that when we speak with passion in a single voice, we cannot be ignored.

For me, this card was very clearly about the Occupy Wall Street protests. Agree or disagree with the politics behind the movement, you have to respect the courage and power of the act. They came to Wall Street, and made everyone listen simply by refusing to go away until they were heard. I took some photos at Zuccotti Park, where the Occupy movement was camped out until they were forcibly removed by the NYPD. The trees were all green at the time, but when everyone was camped out there in the fall of 2011, the leaves were a brilliant flaming yellow, illuminated at night by massive generator-driven lights.

While researching this card, the Occupy people were still around—they'd just moved base uptown to Union Square. I stopped by to speak to a few people, and donate some old clothes. The painted cardboard signs I made for this design are inspired by some of the signs I snapped photos of while there.

**Completed in August 2012**

## 8: ∫ WIFTNES ∫

There comes a point in any enterprise when the choices laid out before us can seem overwhelming, and we can become paralyzed by conflicting voices from all sides. The Eight of Wands reminds us that we must keep swimming to stay afloat, and that sometimes the most important thing that we can do is simply move forward as fast as we can before our cause runs out of steam.

I was originally thinking of this card as having a clear association with the Internet. In the Book of Thoth, Crowley talks about this card as being related to light and electricity. The Thoth version of the card turns the wands into lightning bolts. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that:

1. The Internet isn't the city.
2. The Internet is a fast mode of communication, but it doesn't have the same associations with rapid action and decisive movement that this card is really talking about.
3. Speaking as a one-time web developer, I'm pretty sure that any way I tried to illustrate the Web would look kind of silly on a card.

Anyway, I changed focus and decided that a bicycle delivery person was much more of the right feel for the set. And then I further noticed that the wand arrangement on the Thoth card was a nice match for a bike wheel, or a standard eight-slice New York pizza pie.

I should note that I have often used the same arrangement of pips (wands, swords, cups, disks) on my Minor Arcana as on the Thoth cards. I don't really have any particular reason for doing so other than I've found it an interesting system to design around, and it's a nice way to connect myself to that older deck, which helped to provide inspiration for this set.

**Completed in June 2012**

## 9: FORTITUDE

The Nine of Wands represents strength in adversity; the will to continue onward in an utterly thankless task when there may be no end in sight. It is determination, and devotion to duty through sheer force of will. It is a single fire that burns stubbornly despite the dark and the cold.

The building depicted here is the main USPS building on 8th Avenue, known as the James Farley Post Office. There is a well-known inscription on this building, adapted by the building's architects from an ancient Greek quotation. You have heard it before, and probably thought that it was the Postal Service's motto. You would be wrong, technically; it has never actually been adopted officially. The inscription, running across the illuminated bar above the colonnade, reads:

*Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom  
of night stays these couriers from the swift  
completion of their appointed rounds.*

There is a certain sad angle to this, when you think of how the Post Office is in such decline over the past few years. Email has made them increasingly irrelevant, and lower circulation rates have led to dwindling funds. As an agency that traces its roots back to 1775, it's entirely possible that the USPS will be completely phased out in the near future. The James Farley building itself is currently being renovated, and will be largely repurposed as a new train station in years to come.

It hadn't occurred to me before planning out this piece that those mail push carts, which are so familiar to me, are a sight mostly unique to New York. In most other places in America, it's far more convenient to simply have a mail truck drive from place to place. With everything so dense, and the streets so full, New Yorkers do a lot of walking.

**Completed in August 2012**



## 10: OPPRESSION

Here we have the conclusion of the cycle of Wands in the Minors, coming all the way from inspiration, a tiny spark, to a roaring fire that consumes and destroys everything else in its path. The tens each represent the ultimate over-expression of their element. In the case of the Wands, the fire of ideals has become the crushing dogma of oppression.

The Ten represents an idea that has become the institution, and has gained the power to crush all other ideas. In this card, we have lost all of the hope and freedom of potential in the earlier cards. Strength has been corrupted into cruelty, passion into obedience, creativity into intolerance. The Ten asks us to step back and consider if we have gone too far, if we have accepted inhumanity and pain in the name of an idea. It is worth remembering that there must always be room for other ideas, other voices, than the one you have listened to.

The movement we began to change the world for the better has become the establishment. It is now left to those who will come next to rise up, burn down the walls we have built, and begin the cycle again.

In interpreting this card, I wanted to depict a real, current, and ongoing social oppression that exists in my city. The undeniable reality is that for a black male in his thirties, the odds are about one in ten that he will be in jail on any given day. Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be stopped by police, more likely to be arrested, and more likely to be denied bail than whites. As a result, minorities make up more than 60% of our massive population of incarcerated citizens. It is a cumulative systemic bias that undermines the basic principles of our justice system.

**Model: Richard Silvera**  
**Completed in September 2012**

## KNIGHT OF WANDS: THE ROCKSTAR

The Knight of Wands represents Fire within Fire, the embodiment of pure passion, rebellion, idealism, and charisma. The Knight is a warrior, a leader, a blazing spark that burns fiercely and then, perhaps, burns out quickly as well. The Knight is a noble crusader, charging forward for an idealistic cause. He is powerful and honest, but as a figure completely driven by Fire, he lacks the calm reason of Air, the empathy of Water, and the grounded restraint of Earth. If the Knight lets his ego drive him, it can lead him to be a selfish bully rather than a hero.

My model here is Anton Adam, whom I visited at his home in Honolulu. Anton took me for a tour of the USS North Carolina, the nuclear submarine that he serves aboard as supply officer. It was an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime sort of experience for a mild-mannered civilian such as myself. For the photo shoot, Anton put on some of his old club gear and sang along to a punk and metal playlist, using a mop as a stand-in mic stand.

My inspiration for the card was Joey Ramone, performing at CBGB here in New York. Anton is flanked here on stage by Johnny and Dee Dee Ramone, the late band members of the Ramones. In the background, there is a poster of the band members faintly visible on the wall. The Pegasus, a proper mount for heroes of legend, appears on the drum kit as the symbolic horse image I've included on each of the four Knights.

**Model: Anton Adam**  
**Completed in October 2012**

## QUEEN OF WANDS: THE PUBLIC DEFENDER

The Queen is the master of emotion, persuasion, and sympathy in the context of passion and idealism. She is loving and compassionate, and yet fierce and protective of her ideals. I've chosen to envision her as an attorney, fighting passionately on the behalf of the accused. A successful lawyer makes use of the jury's sympathies for their defendant to win their case; if she can encourage them to feel a connection to her client, then they may be more open to doubting the case of the prosecution.

I had the chance to see my model, Verena Powell, do exactly that in the courtroom in the week before I started working on this piece. She was the defense attorney on a case I was called in to sit on the jury for. I was immediately impressed by the presence she had in the courtroom and the passion she put into the defense of her client—a man who stood accused of some very frightening crimes.

The fountain in the foreground of this card is the Triumph of the Human Spirit Memorial, designed in 1993 by Dr. Lorenzo Pace and inspired by stylized antelope headdresses worn by the people of Mali, West Africa. Behind it, you can see the front of the New York County Supreme Court at 60 Centre Street. The leopard in the foreground is a nod to the one that appears at the Queen's right hand on the Thoth version of this card, and is a symbol of power, grace, and ferocity.

**Model: Verena Powell**  
**Completed in November 2012**

## PRINCE OF WANDS: THE JOURNALIST

This card speaks of reason and intellect in the context of passion. It's often interpreted as representing a noble trickster, or a fiery champion for moral change. The Prince uses words as his weapons, satirizing those in power and drawing attention to those who are in need. If he seems to bear a certain resemblance to news satirists like Jon Stewart and those who have followed in his mold since he stepped down, this is not an accident. They walk this weird, brave line between legitimate news anchors and comedians. Every once in a while they manage to speak more powerfully than either.

During the fundraising campaign I ran on Kickstarter, Eben Lowe made a comment online, expressing how much he wished he could afford the reward level that would let him be a model for the series. It seemed silly to me not to include someone who felt so much passion for the deck, and so, in lieu of money, I asked him to help me get the word out and have folks on social media post about the campaign. Eben was happy to put his charisma to work, and so I am happy to include him here as my outspoken and engaging journalist.

I was aiming to create the look of broadcast graphics with the background, with the stars and stripes motif blending into the New York skyline. It's a slightly slicker aesthetic from the one I normally use, but I think it works here. I overlaid two stock illustrations on each other and layered the whole thing with a photo of rain on a window, which makes it feel more physical, and less perfect and smooth.

Other interesting textures in here—I used a wood cutting board for the hair, aluminum foil for the tie, and a photo of clear shimmering water as the base of the glass desk.

**Model: Eben Lowe**  
**Completed in July 2012**



## PRINCESS OF WANDS: THE DANCER

The Princess of Wands is a burlesque performer in the middle of a fire dance on stage at a small club. There has been a revival of burlesque in New York in the last decade or so, with clubs all over the city hosting mixed-gender performances. Burlesque shows incorporate humor with choreography and sensuality into a show that is both sexy and fun while being far more inviting to many people than a straightforward strip show could ever be.

The Princess is Earth in the context of Fire, physicality in the realm of passion. She is full of lust and grace; she is seductive, enticing, and brimming with the pure joy of living. It is wise to remember, however, when you open the door for the Princess of Wands, you will face both the lady and the tiger.

Lacking the emotional connection of Water or the rational inhibitions of Air, the Princess can also be cruel and thoughtless, too focused on her own indulgence to truly care for others. Her powerful stage presence draws you in like a moth to a flame, but she may already have her attentions on someone else while you recover from your burns.

Janet Bruesselbach is an artist herself, whose talent and passion frankly humble me. I was so happy to have her as a model in this series, as I've occasionally modeled for her projects. We tried a number of poses to see what seemed to work best, as Janet wrapped herself around a chair and posed with bamboo skewers in place of flaming torches. I was pretty happy to have found this particularly weird and unexpected angle during the photo shoot.

**Model: Janet Bruesselbach  
Completed in May 2012**

## THE ACE OF CUPS

This is the card of pure, elemental Water. It is the root of everything that Water reflects and embodies: the eternal wellspring, the calm pool, the cool rain. Water is the element of emotion, of dreams, and of relationships.

The story that begins in the Ace of Cups is the story of a romance. Imagine this card as that chance encounter, an unexpected meeting that seems full of promise. This card is not yet love at first sight. Rather, it is that first sight which holds the infinite potential of love.

I've chosen here to depict the famous Bethesda Fountain in Central Park, on the shore of the Pond. The fountain, I'm sure, has been the location of many first meetings, and on any nice day in the summer you'll find at least one couple decked out in their wedding attire taking photos by the water. But in addition to its romantic atmosphere, the location also has an important connection to the history of water in New York City.

By the early 19th century, New York City was already a growing metropolis, and it was struggling to provide clean drinking water to a growing population. This fountain was constructed to commemorate the 1842 opening of the Croton Aqueduct, which brought unpolluted water into the city from Westchester. Emma Stebbins sculpted the fountain, which she titled *Angel of the Waters*, making her the first woman to be commissioned for a major piece of public art in the city.

The towers in the background are the lovely and much sought-after San Remo apartments, which are indeed overlooking Central Park West, but are not directly visible behind the angel as I've placed them here.

**Completed in August 2013**



## 2: LOVE

In each of the aces, we saw the element that they represented expressed in its purest, most abstract form. The Ace of Cups represented a singular, pure idea of love that had no specific object. With the Two, we see that idea in its simplest concrete expression. Love here has a focus—it becomes more real by being shared.

The love this card represents is a young love, a newborn love that hasn't yet been tested by hardship or struggle. It's that immediate, overwhelming infatuation or crush. It's Romeo and Juliet. Of course, we know that in the long run Romeo and Juliet don't do so well (spoilers), but that's all still ahead of them. While there are darker cards to come in the story of the Cups, right now, in this moment, it's all pink clouds and warm feelings.

I imagined this scene being about two strangers meeting one morning at a coffee shop (my "Green Lotus Coffee" logo is meant to suggest a more well-known and ubiquitous brand). While checking their respective emails, they reach for their mugs at the same moment and happen to touch, noticing each other for the first time. Thanks again to Dev and Laura for modeling this moment for me.

A note on the pips: In the other three suits, I've stuck with a consistent pip design that appears on each of the numbered cards in the Minor Arcana. Instead of using the same crystal goblet across all ten cards of the suit of Cups, I decided to break with my previous style a bit and use a different kind of cup for each card, returning to the crystal goblet one last time with the Ten. Cups fit comfortably into any number of settings in an urban context, especially a social context, which is the primary domain of the element of Water. Moreover, the kind of cup being used can say a lot about the scene, and so it seemed foolish to force myself to use only a single design throughout.

**Models: Laura Simpson & Dev Purkayastha  
Completed in October 2013**

### 3: ABUNDANCE

The Three of Cups is a fairly straightforward card. It speaks to us of the joys of friendship, the emotional rewards of coming together as one. It's such a common and positive idea that expressing it almost feels trite. It was hard to imagine a version of this card that didn't feel a little clichéd. I'm sorry I only later realized that The Three of Cups is actually the name of a lovely little Italian restaurant here in the city. If I had known, I might have set this scene there.

We will pass through every stage of a relationship as we tell the story of the suit of Cups. Still early, here in the Three, we have entered what has sometimes been called the "honeymoon period." We have found joy, and pleasure, and fulfillment without limit. Life is a celebration, and every song is sung for you. This is the time we wish could last forever, although we know of course it can't.

This card represents the feeling of joy that comes from knowing that you are surrounded by those who love you, support you, and want only the best for you. It's a birthday party on New Year's Eve, and a toast in your honor. It's a kiss at midnight, while the sky explodes, all for just the three of you. It is an abundance of joy, of love, of camaraderie and warmth.

Thank you to my dear friends Anthony Bamonte and Ilan Norwood, and my wife Amy, for lending their hands to this image.

**Completed in November 2013**



## 4: LUXURY

With each of the fours, we reach a place of stability and of security. In the realm of emotions represented by the suit of Cups, stability is both highly prized and a bit worrying. We all want to know where we stand, to have someone else that we know we can rely on for support and let our guard down around. But when our relationships become too comfortable, they can also become suffocatingly stale.

The relationship that began at first sight in the Two of Cups has lasted past the honeymoon phase of the Three and has entered that space where you and your partner can enjoy comfortable silences, where you can watch TV together, enjoy cookies and milk in your underwear, and simply relax in each other's presence without even interacting directly. We have a life of luxury—not a luxury borne from material wealth, but from having all we need emotionally within easy reach. We can rest, knowing that we are supported and loved by someone who has known us at both our best and our worst. There is still a richness of love here, but it's lost the sense of exciting newness it once had. My wife put it exactly right when she told me this card represents a relationship where people are no longer afraid to fart in front of each other.

Comfort and stability are essential to any healthy long-term relationship, but if you get caught up in them, they can become the start of a long downward slope towards the end. Without risk and excitement, without romance, it's easy to fall into a rut that you never pull yourselves out of.

**Models: Eblyn Miguel Angel & Shawn Roberts  
Completed in November 2013**

## 5: DISAPPOINTMENT

The fives are always trouble. Midway through our journey in each suit, we will find the place of opposition, where the guiding element encounters its natural opposite and risks losing everything it has gained. In this card, we see that perfect relationship we began in the Two of Cups come crashing down around us. The dream of Water has been caught up in the spiraling chaos of Fire.

Disappointment feels like such a mild word for so much pain. What does it mean when you are disappointed by someone close to you? What does it feel like to know that someone you love is disappointed in you? It can be a crushing, lonely feeling. There is grief there, and anger, and certainly fear. Is your relationship a lie? Has the person you trusted betrayed you? Have you lost everything you'd been working so hard to achieve?

The feelings we see in this card are hard to pin down, but if you have known love in your life, you have certainly also known the pain of disappointment. You had high hopes for what could have been, for who that person you put your trust in was, for who they were capable of being. You have learned something, but it was something you hoped never to learn. Perhaps someone you put your trust in was not worthy of it. Perhaps it was you. Perhaps it was inevitable. Perhaps it was obvious to everyone but you. In this moment, does it matter?

What happened to lead to the scene we see here? A break up? A divorce? The discovery of infidelity? An act of violence? Death? It could be all of the above, or something else entirely. The point is less the specifics of the narrative, and more the feelings involved, and the aftermath of their expression. What we hoped would last has been shattered. Whether it can be repaired or not is another question.

Yes, that is a raw steak in the background. I wanted that broken china hutch to feel like an open chest wound.

**Completed in March 2014**



## 6: PLEASURE

The four sixes, to quote Aleister Crowley, are “representative of their respective elements at their practical best.” When we reach the six of each suit, we have passed through the early, uncertain steps of the ones through threes, hit that initial successful plateau of the four, and then fallen into the trouble and strife of the five. We have passed through that, and found a new kind of harmonious balance. As we pass on to seven, each element begins to have problems within itself, and becomes overexpressed, but in the six we have everything working the way we want.

The Six of Cups represents Pleasure, and yes, it's certainly the sex card. But the Cups are not concerned with simple physical pleasure—the element of Water is about the emotional dimension, and the power of the bonds we form with each other. So this card represents not just any sex, it's *perfect* sex. It's the kind of sex that brings you closer to your partner, that deepens and renews the love between you. This card often has connotations of fertility, and kindness and innocence, and I see that as all part of the same idea. The Six of Cups represents sexuality without guilt or shame, the sex that you can feel entirely good about. It is perhaps best imagined as that idealized wedding night sex, on clean white silk sheets.

I was honored to serve as one of the groomsmen for my hand models, Jay and Katherine, at their wedding on a beach in the Dominican Republic. Jay had been a model in the set already, when he posed as the Prince of Swords many years previously. Looking back, I used the exact same natural paper texture for his skin then, and was apparently just as fascinated with Jay's long fingers and interesting, wrinkly joints.

**Models: Jay Powell & Katherine Molina-Powell  
Completed in August 2013**

## 7: DEBAUCH

Aleister Crowley had some choice words to say about Debauchery in the Book of Thoth. “This is one of the worst ideas that one can have;” he explains. “Its mode is poison, its goal madness.” Considering the exciting life Crowley was reported to have enjoyed, I’m suspecting that his unusual clarity regarding this card may come from some personal experiences with the dangers of excess. The Thoth version of the card that Lady Frieda Harris painted for him depicts a set of cups overflowing with some sort of horrible green slime, floating above a lake of the same.

In all the sevens, we see what happens when energies in the pure and perfect six become unbalanced and corrupted. The Seven of Cups speaks to us of the powerful, sometimes irresistible, allure of false and fleeting pleasure: glittering and exciting, but ultimately self-destructive. We seek fun and escape in drugs, alcohol, sexual adventure, but those thrills do not last, and when they are pursued as ends in themselves, they lead only to destruction. Does that mean it’s unwise to enjoy a reckless night of hedonism now and again? Certainly not if you’re asking me; I like to think of myself as generally quite debauchery-positive, in the appropriate times and places. But the temptation to indulge in ever greater and ever more risky excesses can be deeply seductive.

I envisioned a wild bachelorette party for this card, or rather the last painful dregs of a party that has already gone on a bit longer than was really wise. A dazzling series of tempting, fruity frozen drinks stands above a table littered with the castoffs of a drunken night that nobody will recall too clearly. In the Six of Cups, we saw Pleasure that was healthy and life-affirming. Here we see that same pursuit of pleasure become corrupt through blind over-reaching, leading to an inevitable downward spiral of regret and pain.

**Completed in September 2014**



## 8: INDOLENCE

After the initial honeymoon phase we saw in the first three cards in the suit, the relationship story told in the Cups has suffered through some difficult times. With the Four, we faced the dangers of getting too comfortable and stale. In the Five, we dealt with betrayal and disappointment. Although the Six brought us once more to pure joy, the Seven immediately found itself overindulging in that pleasure, and becoming corrupted by it. With the Eight, we see perhaps the ultimate threat to any relationship: when someone simply stops caring enough to make it work.

We all know the signs when someone has stopped putting in the effort. Maybe they are waiting to be dumped, because they don't have the courage to leave. Maybe they're just killing time at their job, waiting to be fired because they haven't the motivation to quit. There is a siren call, which we have all heard at one time or another, that tells you to give up, stay home, phone it in, and just stop giving a crap. Goodness knows I've answered that call more than I'd like to admit.

This card represents a toxic morass of procrastination, distraction, depression, and sloth; an ever-deepening pit that we dig for ourselves. The longer we stay in it, the harder it becomes to climb out again. It takes the strength of will that allows us to speak honest, painful truths, and the emotional courage we sometimes need to stand up and simply walk away.

I had been imagining this card originally as being set in some anonymous cubicle farm, where a lazy employee was drinking on the job and playing solitaire rather than working. But I decided to get a little more personal with it, and depict my own workstation, and put my own self-recriminations for laziness right up on the screen. One big blank rectangle open in Photoshop...the empty canvas is a scary thing for any artist to contemplate.

**Completed in November 2014**

## 9: HAPPINESS

The pursuit of Happiness is important enough to us that we wrote it into the Declaration of Independence here in the USA as an inalienable right. What is that perfect happiness? A single moment without care, surrounded by family and friends, knowing that you are loved and safe. With the Nine, the love that began our journey through the suit of Cups has reached its full expression and become an all-encompassing fulfillment. This is what we strive for. From the moment we first held hands, through all of the ups and downs and painful setbacks, this is the vision that has driven us, a happiness that knows no fear, no doubt, no reservation.

It is, like all the Cups, a shimmering dream just out of reach of our mundane reality, but one worth pursuing. There is a sense in this image of a scene too perfect to be real, like a memory seen through rose-tinted lenses. Aleister Crowley referred to this card as “a dream within a dream.” There’s nothing cynical about that—even if true happiness exists only in the mind and the heart, that makes it no less real and powerful for us.

I had some fun with mixed media in this piece. You’ll see a lot of textures scribbled in with crayon and paint, appearing side by side with more sharply defined details. The scene is set in Fort Washington Park, with the impressive arches of the George Washington Bridge reaching across the Hudson in the background. In the summer months, the picnic tables along the river are abuzz with families gathering around the public grills, and the smell of food drifts through the park.

**Completed in December 2014**



## 10:∫ATIETY

Finally, with the last step in the story of the Cups, we reach that fabled Happily Ever After. If the Nine represented a single moment of pure happiness, the Ten represents that happiness stretching from this moment forward far into the future. This card speaks of love's ultimate dream, of home and family, for the rest of your days. It is joy, and peace, and the hope of the next generation.

In the classic Rider-Waite-Smith deck, I've long believed that Pamela Colman Smith deliberately inserted herself into the Ten of Cups, depicting herself and her female partner living together as a family, with two children of their own, under a rainbow. I strongly believe (although we can never know for sure) that what we are seeing in that card is the impossible dream of a happy same-sex marriage, drawn by a queer woman of color, over a century ago.

I am now myself one half of a legal same-sex marriage, and I am very thankful to be in a part of the world that recognizes both my union and my gender. My wife and I share our home with another same-sex couple, Sarah and Jen Salenger. They have been married since 2010, and legally recognized as such since 2011, when The Marriage Equality Act was passed here in New York. As of 2015, all 50 states are now finally required to recognize our marriages as equal in the eyes of the law.

I wanted this card to be an homage in part to Pamela Colman Smith, and to that impossible dream which has finally become reality for so many. In the foreground, I've depicted Jen and Sarah as they appeared just a short time before their daughter was born. Their daughter actually appears a second time in the piece, being held aloft by yours truly. The lady with her arm around me is naturally my lovely wife Amy.

**Models: Jen & Sarah Salenger  
Completed in March 2015**

## KNIGHT OF CUPS: THE SEDUCER

A dynamic mix of opposites, the Knight of Cups is the Fire in the suit of Water; he is the avatar of passion and action in the realm of love and emotion. His watery side makes him sensitive, romantic and creative. At the same time, his fiery essence can make him aggressive when he is aroused, and drives him to constantly seek new romantic adventures. The Seducer is attractive and friendly and falls in love easily, but there is a dangerous unpredictability about him. His sudden passion may burn hotly in one moment, and then be just as quickly submerged and snuffed out in the next. One would be well advised to be cautious—while his compassion and warmth may be genuine, they may also run no deeper than reflected candlelight, flickering on the surface of a pond.

The crab sitting in the lovely lady's drink, just out of her line of sight, represents the aggressive water sign of Cancer, and mirrors a similar appearance on the version of this card in the Thoth Tarot. It is also, along with the halo of flame bursting from the kitchen in the background, intended to convey a palpable sense of imminent danger.

I've included an image of a horse on each of the four Knights. On this card it takes the form of a tattoo in the style of a carousel horse on the arm of the Knight's date.

Although not wholly inappropriate in this context, the original subtitle I had planned to use for this card, "The Pick-Up Artist," has come to be associated with an extremely toxic, sexist culture that I'd just as soon not pay direct homage to in my work.

**Models: Alessandro La Porta & Amy Scott  
Completed in October 2014**



## QUEEN OF CUPS: THE THERAPIST

The Queen of Cups represents the role of Water in the context of Water; the emotional center of the court cards. She is kind, affectionate and comforting. She is perfectly accepting, receiving others without judgment of any kind, and stands for calm reflection and introspection. She is the queen of the still pond, the surface of which is a mirror. The Queen's own nature is hard to grasp, for when you gaze into her depths, you only see yourself.

Representing this card as a therapist was an easy decision, and I'm happy to be able to honor that role in my deck. I'm very grateful to the therapists I've worked with; without their help I might not have been able to process some very rough periods in my life in a healthy way.

The surrealistic direction that I was drawn to, in bringing the koi pond into the office, feels appropriate to the dreaminess of this suit. I'm particularly struck with this card, remembering all of the strange little private stories that each texture I use carries. The wood of the tray is a scan of my grandfather's old desk. The printer is the aluminum case for a Palm V organizer I owned in the late 90s. The base texture of the water comes from some shampoo I photographed for a friend's website design many years ago. The textile pattern I dressed Marcy in is from origami paper that my wife bought for her own papercraft projects, and her blouse is a photograph of some whipped cream I spread in a baking dish earlier this week for just this purpose. Sometimes it feels like the palette I'm using is the half-remembered bits of my own strange life, and I like the thought that those odd details of my recollection live on in this new form, totally unrecognizable from where they began.

**Model: Marcia Wootan  
Completed in August 2013**

## PRINCE OF CUPS: THE FILMMAKER

Representing the calm Air over a sea of troubled Water, the Prince of Cups approaches the world of emotions with a careful, sometimes cold, distance. While he may contain a deep sea of emotional complexity within himself, he tends to be guarded about letting others see his vulnerability. Instead, he externalizes that conflict, and looks for ways to evoke those emotions in others.

Will this scene make his audience understand real pain? Will this particular phrasing convey the full force of love? Can this photograph evoke profound loneliness and despair? Each move is measured, calculated to produce a specific effect. The Prince is a master of the emotional sea, but appears to walk above it, keeping a careful and professional distance. Sometimes there can be a kind of cruelty there—is it art, or cunning manipulation? Are his emotions ever genuine, or simply designed to look perfectly genuine?

Compare our Prince of Cups to his twin, the Queen of Swords. Both are the combination of Air and Water, and I've portrayed both as artists of a sort. Our Queen of Swords is a Painter, and her work requires the skill, patience and forethought of Air, but she is fueled by Water in all she does. Perhaps her work conveys those feelings well, perhaps it is incomprehensible to others, but what always comes across is the emotion she has put into it. The Prince of Cups, by contrast, works for his audience, and from a need to see his ideas made manifest. His work is driven by the need to evoke, to beguile, and to charm. He is happiest when people see themselves in his work and he, the creator, is completely forgotten. Not satisfied with simply portraying personal truths, the Prince strives to touch something universal.

**Model: Rob Burke**  
**Completed in January 2014**



## PRINCESS OF CUPS: THE COSTUME DESIGNER

Having one foot in the dreamy world of Water, and one on the solid surface of Earth, the Princess of Cups has the power to crystallize the stuff of imagination into beautiful reality. A kind and gentle dreamer, the Princess embraces the most positive aspects of the element of Water and then uses them to fuel her creativity. She is a lover of romance, of wonder, and of grand stories.

There is, of course, a danger in becoming too wrapped up in the world of dreams. Lacking the clarity of Air or the passion of Fire, the Princess needs to keep herself grounded to the real world, or she might find herself trapped in a castle in the sky built of her own imaginings.

I want to thank backer Susan Goodell for both modeling for this card, and providing the primary inspiration for its direction. When I initially interviewed Susan, she told me about how much she loves Broadway shows, and how she plans every trip she makes to New York around which shows she can get tickets to see. It occurred to me that, if we could describe New York as having a dream life, its dreams play out each night on the theatre stages of the city. I decided that I wanted my Princess of Cups to have a role in building those dreams, so I depicted her as a costume designer, helping to transform imaginary characters into reality through their clothing.

I imagined my Princess working out of a tiny, basement level studio, crowded with materials and bits of inspiration, right in the heart of the theatre district. Her surroundings are meager, but her imagination transforms it into center stage. The costume she has just completed will soon glitter under a spotlight, playing a part in a fairy tale that is retold before a new audience every night.

**Model: Susan Goodell**  
**Completed in June 2014**

## THE ACE OF SWORDS

Air is the element of pure thought. Clear and clean, air moves with swift certainty, and certain power. Invisible but not intangible, a swift wind can cut like the edge of a blade. The suit of Swords speaks to us of the world of logic, of rationality, and of intellectual pursuit. It teaches us about the power of an objective and analytical approach, as well as its ultimate failings.

The Ace of Swords represents that very first part of any intellectual pursuit: an idea. It is that “aha!” experience of sudden realization, that moment of pure clarity. That first simple idea has within it the potential to revolutionize, to overturn old ideas, and to challenge the way we think forever.

As we continue our journey through the Swords, that idea will bring us Peace, a balanced Truce, and all the achievements of Science. But along the way, the pursuit of pure intellect will also bring us Sorrow, will tempt us to Cruelty, will lead us ultimately to Ruin. The Swords know neither mercy nor kindness; they know only the harsh truth of irrefutable logic.

The crown of the Intellect, with a texture of shattered glass, is depicted here encircling the Sword of elemental Air. Behind them is the Washington Square Arch, which stands at the terminus of Fifth Avenue, and whose image is often used as part of NYU’s branding. The arch was constructed on the centennial of Washington’s inauguration, and bears statues of the president on either side of its north face. To the left, Washington is flanked by figures representing Fame and Valor, on the right, he is flanked by Justice and Wisdom. In the latter sculpture, there is an inscription in a book above the President’s head that reads, “*Exitus Acta Probat*,” or, “The End Justifies the Deed.”

**Completed in June 2003**

## 2: PEACE

We recall in the Two of Swords that pure light of understanding of the Sun and that childlike wonder at the simple truth of the world. This is the purest and most positive expression of the intellect, uncluttered by confusion and complexity.

We have considered the idea that first occurred to us in the Ace, and it now seems so perfectly obvious, it's hard to imagine how we didn't think of it before. We have had a moment of Peace to consider, and for this moment, it all appears to fall into place. The logic is as clear as a sunny day, all variables balanced in perfect equilibrium. All the same, we sense that this Peace is not long-lived. Our idea is untested, and what now seems simple may soon prove more complex than we had imagined. Perhaps we have allowed ourselves to rationalize away small, human concerns. Perhaps we have turned a blind eye to the consequences that our idea could lead us to.

On this card we see a playground, protected by a high fence, topped with glittering spirals of barbed wire. Beneath the high, noonday sun, a pair of seesaws stand perfectly balanced and level. There are no children, none of the complexities of humanity and emotion to confuse the clarity, no noise to break the quiet. Our perfect playground is perfectly empty. It is welcoming only in theory, protected from a harsher reality on all sides. There is safety here, though, and the shadows are small.

**Completed in June 2003**

### 3: SORROW

Moving quickly from the warm light of comprehension in the Two, we see now the darker side of understanding. In the Three of Swords, we learn things we wish we did not. With the loss of pleasant illusion, we are forced to confront painful truths that cannot be ignored. Without the emotional support of Water, Air can lead us to accept nihilistic conclusions as the only logical path. We find ourselves remarking as we think back to simpler times, "Ignorance is bliss."

Our idea is now developed, and has begun to reveal its inevitable consequences to us. With a gasp of grim realization, we see that there was only ever one possible outcome, one unavoidable answer. What once seemed to be a solution to all our problems now stares back at us, a condemnation of our hubris. The simple and beautiful truth of  $E=mc^2$  has led us unerringly to the dark reality of the Manhattan Project.

I'm not sure what I can say about this image. It's certainly hard to look at. I will say that I have lost both friends and family to suicide in my life. There are times that it seems like a silent epidemic, decimating the most vulnerable populations and stealing away our best and brightest. There are those who leave behind nothing but unanswered questions, and we can only wonder at what made them decide to leave us.

**Completed in October 2003**

## 4: TRUCE

Here we see revealed the great power that the rational mind is capable of. An objective viewpoint gives us the ability to see past our differences, to put emotional arguments aside, and to offer tolerance to those who have been our enemies. The Four of Swords brings an end to hostilities, as diplomacy and negotiation replace the chaos of war and distrust. Powers are held in perfect balance by the rule of order, and we are given space to reflect, to move forward. The cautious Peace of the Two of Swords was more a cease-fire than a lasting treaty. Here, that same balance has been made more solid, more fully considered. While old grudges have not been eliminated, they have no power here. All sides respect the value of Truce; we can lay down our swords for now and rest.

The idea that struck us as a moment of inspiration in the Ace has now been fully realized. We have published our findings, confident that our reasoning will stand up to peer review. Opposing concepts have been considered, responded to, and integrated into our argument. We are eager to move forward from here, demonstrating the value of what we have found.

This card was intended to represent the General Assembly Hall at the United Nations headquarters, here in New York. More accurately, the UN structure stands on a tiny piece of Manhattan real estate along the East River, which, according to international treaty, is not officially part of the United States. Since it was founded in 1945, the UN has represented the belief that we could prevent another global war by having a forum where all nations could air their grievances. It is a powerful idea, and while many people may argue with the UN's effectiveness, it continues to stand as a reminder of what we can achieve through open and honest communication.

**Completed in March 2004**

## 5: DEFEAT

Try as we might, sometimes we just can't win.

With each of the fives, we see that the success and stability we had so far achieved can be overturned. The Truce we had previously earned through dedication to the order of law is betrayed ultimately by self-interest and deception. The Five of Swords teaches us that no matter how well we think we have the game figured out, our winning streak simply can't last forever.

With the Four, we reached the limit of our idealistic reliance on the logical powers of Air. Expecting the world to follow your own system of rational order is ultimately self-defeating. Sooner or later we will either find that we have failed to account for the selfishness of others, or we have failed to recognize our own corruption.

Our intellectual pride rages that our idea has not been immediately accepted as truth, and we blame the foolishness and short-sightedness of others for our struggle. If only they would put aside their ignorant and irrelevant assumptions, they would see the truth as plainly as we do. It would be wise to take a moment here, and accept some of the hard realities of our own limits. Perhaps we have set our sights beyond our abilities. Perhaps we need to take another look at our own prejudices, as the fault may as easily lie within as without.

It seemed an easy connection to tie this card to gambling. It is one of the oldest kinds of folly, to think that we can outsmart the house, to think that we can beat a game that we know is designed to beat us. I imagined this video poker machine sitting in the darkened corner of a bar, challenging us to a battle of wits when we are at our least capable. We may win in the short term, certainly. But play the game long enough and we're bound to end up broke, blaming the mechanical bandit for our losses.

**Completed in November 2003**



## 6: SCIENCE

With the Six of Swords, the cold logic of Air has finally come into a perfect harmony with the world around it. In the world of Science, we acknowledge that we are flawed beings, prone to weakness and to misunderstanding. Through rigorous application of the scientific method, we account for the fallibility of the individual and together seek a greater understanding. If we are to add to the great canon of human knowledge, if our discoveries are to benefit all, we must first have the humility to remove ourselves from the equation.

This card stands for the triumph of the intellect over ignorance, the power of the rational mind to create a better world. Do not forget, however, what we have sacrificed in that triumph. Science begins with the most noble goals at heart, but it must turn against that heart in order to reach them, sacrificing emotional concerns for the light of pure objectivity. What are we left with, when we have eliminated all trace of humanity from our endeavour?

The idea that first came to us at the beginning of our journey into the Swords has finally been recognized by our peers. We have proceeded from hypothesis to experiment to conclusion, recording every step with careful detachment. We have opened ourselves up to peer review, and allowed others to reach the same conclusions for themselves. Now finally, after so much trouble, we have achieved the acceptance we sought.

This card is one of only two I've significantly updated from the first edition of the deck. In the original, I had used a caduceus as a fairly common, albeit incorrect, symbol for the field of medicine. Hermes' winged staff is more appropriately an emblem of transit and commerce, but a simple mistake in 1902 put them on the U.S. Army Medical Corps uniforms, and it has been associated with medicine ever since. In the updated piece, I have tried instead to reference the Rod of Asclepius, a similar but far more appropriate symbol for medical science.

**Completed in March 2004**  
**Updated in August 2017**

## 7: FUTILITY

*I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience, but rules are rules, of course. Now if you could just fill out this form, and then wait at the back of that line, someone will help you shortly...*

The rule of law is meant to treat all of us as equal, but somehow the rules always come down hard on some, while bending easily for others. When the law becomes a tangled network of intentionally confusing and arcane restrictions, the clever and the wealthy can always find a loophole. For the rest of us, there is the endless purgatory of bureaucracy. Our spirit is slowly worn down while we go round and round, accomplishing nothing. With the Seven of Swords, we learn that the same tools that helped us to create order can also perpetuate inequality, create stagnation, and protect the deceitful and immoral from facing consequences.

You can't beat the system, they say. At least not without a good lawyer. The wheels of justice grind the powerless beneath them, while those already in power find a way to take advantage at every turn. At every stage they will claim that nothing they have done is illegal, they will say that the system is fair, because everyone has the same chance to cheat if they simply know how.

The idea we saw reach general acceptance in the Six has run up against an endless series of obstacles and regulations that prevent it from being actually put into practice. We see the ideal situation, but the gatekeepers of the world find ways to delay and dispute, to distract us from the real issues, and to bog us down in endless minutiae. In theory, nothing stands in our way. In reality, we begin to worry that simply being right isn't going to be nearly enough.

**Completed in February 2004**



## 8: INTERFERENCE

Whenever we have many voices speaking together, it's easy to get endlessly trapped in the confusing tangle. It can seem an impossible problem, separating signal from noise. How do we know which voices to listen to and which to ignore?

The Eight of Swords shows us how the tendency to consider all sides and analyze all options can lead us to total paralysis. Confused and unsure of everything, we become restless and unproductive. We find ourselves flicking through the channels or browsing our social media sites endlessly, caught up in the cycle of unlimited input. We find that for every well-reasoned argument, there is a counterargument that sounds just as reasonable.

The pure element of Air offers us no end to our aimless pondering. Only with the insight gained from the other elements can we hope to put our options in perspective and make clear decisions. The only people who are always certain that they are in the right are those who have abandoned reason entirely.

The idea that once seemed so clear to us has gotten very muddy indeed. Opened to the court of public opinion, everyone has a different take on what our idea means for them and what it implies. There are moral and practical objections we simply cannot ignore, and there seems to be no way forward. The public cannot find common ground on the issue, and we lose countless hours reading through comments threads that never seem to end.

**Completed in January 2004**

## 9: CRUELTY

In the other three nines, we see the most mature, positive expression of each of their respective elements. The Disks and the Cups bring us Gain and Happiness respectively, the full enjoyment of what material and emotional wealth can offer. The Wands bring us Fortitude with the Nine, the enduring power of the spirit to meet all the challenges that life can set before us. Why then do we find ourselves seeing nothing but Cruelty here in the Nine of Swords?

The realm of Air offers us no restful endpoint. There is no finish line for the mind. There is always another problem to solve, another question still unanswered. Take any idea far enough and you will find the point where you must choose between being right and being humane. Choose one path, and you will have to step away from the cerebral element of Air. Let yourself be guided by the heart instead of the mind. Choose the other path, and suffering will inevitably follow.

The people who create dictatorships begin by trying to create order and harmony. The people who build weapons start by trying to create peace. The people who perpetuate violence start by trying to protect the people they love. The most terrifying conclusions begin with the most noble of goals.

We saw this card coming from the beginning of the suit. We made a decision from that first moment of inspiration in the Ace—"The End Justifies the Deed." We have always understood that the deeds we would need to justify by that phrase would involve turning a blind eye to the suffering of others. If our end is important enough, noble enough, isn't some small amount of cruelty justified? After all, in any long calculation, if the stakes are high enough, the human factors simply cancel each other out.

**Completed in January 2004**



## 10: RUIN

With the Ten of Swords, we look out on an empty wasteland, knowing that it was our choices that brought about this wholesale destruction. We look back across the charred wreckage of our life and understand that it has all been our doing. We have done terrible things, created great pain, and at each stage we believed we had no other choice. Now, we fear that it is far too late to try and change. What was begun with Cruelty in the Nine, finds its ultimate dark fulfillment with Ruin in the Ten.

The cost of endless analysis is the loss of hope. The cost of endless control is the death of freedom. Perfect understanding leaves no room for faith.

Still, this card is not completely without a hopeful side. Even Ruin has something to teach us. It is a painful lesson, but it's often said that hitting rock bottom just means you have nowhere to go but up. It will not be an easy task to rebuild ourselves from this destruction, but if we take the lessons of our experience to heart, we will be far wiser when we begin the cycle again.

We see here a spoon, cooking heroin over a candle flame, and a syringe slowly drawing the poison in. I would not wish this to be interpreted as a preachy anti-drug message; it was not simply my intent to say here that hard drugs will lead you to ruin. Instead, I wanted to conjure that sense of hopelessness that comes from being trapped in a painful cycle of addiction and seeing no way out. There are many forms of Ruin, and many roads to find it. Unable to see past the destructive consequences of our own choices, we choose finally to quiet the terrible clamor in our own mind by any means possible.

**Completed in January 2004**

## KNIGHT OF SWORDS: THE GAME MASTER

Be very cautious in challenging the Knight of Swords to a test of wits. While some people retreat from conflict and argument, the Knight relishes it. Every debate, every logical conundrum, is an opportunity for him to shine. Solving problems of the mind is what fuels the fire of his spirit, and he loves any opportunity to prove the power of his keen intellect.

The Knight of Swords wields his mind like a blade, slicing through problems with an aggressive zeal. Discovering subtle errors and inconsistencies never fails to bring a smile to his face, and he is usually the first to point out when someone has slipped up somewhere. He brings his passion for confronting tough logical quandaries to every situation, treating every new challenge like a game he's confident he can win. His sharp, analytical wit makes him a great person to have on your team, and a dangerous opponent to face across the table.

A perfect storm of Fire and Air, the Knight of Swords lacks the easy empathy of Water, and the grounded stability of Earth. Don't expect him to show you mercy in the midst of battle; there is no room for messy feelings in his perfect game plan. Be also warned that his leaps of logic may need to be reined in now and again, as the Knight would often prefer see a problem solved elegantly, rather than practically.

This card was actually the very first one I tackled in the set. Looking back on it now, almost 13 years later, there is a lot I would do differently if I approached it again today. I learned a great deal in my journey through the 78 cards of this deck, and my style evolved a great deal. One thing I certainly wouldn't change, however, was selecting Dan Edmonds as my model on this card. Dan's keen intellect has never failed to impress me, and I have learned over the years not to ever bet against him when it comes to games.

**Model: Dan Edmonds**  
**Completed in March 2003**

## QUEEN OF SWORDS: THE PAINTER

There exists a certain idealized vision of what it means to be an artist. An artist is supposed to be self-confident, and driven by a font of pure inspiration from within. Having no concern for the allure of fortune and fame, the Artist is driven only by The Work. The Queen of Swords is very much this breed of artist. She creates because she must, and it matters little to her whether her work is ever even seen by another soul. The only reward she seeks is in the act of creation itself.

The Queen of Swords is a keen observer and possesses a sharp, creative intellect. Like all in the court of Swords, her mind is constantly abuzz with new ideas. However, her ideas are drawn from the watery world of dreams and emotions. The Queen feels as keenly as she sees, absorbing everything around her. Through her talent, she distills the world and shows it back to itself. Her art is the mirror she holds up, and in it a deeper kind of truth is reflected.

Drifting like a cloud, she has no concern for the petty problems of Earth. Utterly impractical, the Queen's imagination floats free and takes her to places others would never dream of. Untouched by Fire, she is graceful and calm, and cannot be easily steered by the ideals of others. Without Fire's fortitude and drive, however, she can sometimes be overly sensitive to emotional currents, switching from the caring empathy of Water to the cold inaccessibility of Air in a moment.

I had Debbie pose for this image sitting in front of my old drafting table, in a space I had once imagined would be my studio. Over time, it turned out that my approach to art involved using a mouse much more than it involved a brush. I eventually got rid of the drafting table, but I admit I will always find traditional painting to hold a certain romantic appeal.

**Model: Debbie Trencher  
Completed in April 2003**

## PRINCE OF SWORDS: THE HACKER

*Let me tell you why you're here. You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad. It is this feeling that has brought you to me.*

— *The Matrix*

We began the suit of Swords with a light bulb going on above our head, with that pure spark of an idea. Through the Minor Arcana, we saw what rewards came from chasing that idea, and we also saw the costs. The Prince of Swords is driven by the power of the idea, the allure of finding out the Truth. He is the sort of individual who will follow an investigation no matter what rabbit holes it leads him down.

For the Prince, information is everything. No ideal, no law, no obstacle will stand between him and the question tugging at his mind. In the pursuit of answers, he can be incredibly resourceful and utterly determined. He is flexible and creative, but also focused and precise. His mind runs hot, constantly churning out new solutions, but the Prince rarely loses his cool.

We saw the Prince's potential downfall through the numbered cards in this suit; his failings are those inherent in following the path of pure Air. For all his brilliance, the Prince doesn't usually play well with others. Without the social connection of Water, he can be cold, callous, even cruel. Lacking a connection to Earth, he has little respect for the hard work and property of others. Disconnected from the noble ideals of Fire, he cannot always be trusted.

**Model: Jay Powell  
Completed in October 2003**

## PRINCESS OF SWORDS: THE ACTIVIST

*The Princess of Swords represents the earthy part of Air, the fixation of the volatile. She brings about the materialization of Idea. She represents the influence of Heaven upon Earth. She partakes of the characteristics of Minerva and Artemis, and there is some suggestion of the Valkyrie. She represents to some extent the anger of the Gods, and she appears helmed, with serpent-haired Medusa for her crest. She stands in front of a barren altar as if to avenge its profanation, and she stabs downward with her sword. The heaven and the clouds, which are her home, seem angry.*

— Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth*

The above paragraph opens Crowley's description of the Princess of Swords, in what I found to be an unusually poetic and powerful passage. He was, of course, describing his own Thoth deck, and making reference to the beautiful painting of that card created for it by Lady Frieda Harris. I make no illusions about how much this deck has been informed by the Thoth deck, and although "Uncle Al" and I do not always see eye to eye, it's fairly clear to see how much my Princess was inspired by his.

Logical and clever, yet stable and practical, the Princess cannot be swayed, she cannot be intimidated. Rather than a Valkyrie, I envisioned my Princess as an environmental activist, shouting slogans through a bullhorn, and handing out flyers in Central Park. Rooted in the Earth, she knows that a storm is coming, and she needs to change a lot of minds in order to fight it. She is a warrior at heart, and her weapon is her words.

**Model: Carolyn Grossman  
Completed in April 2003**

## THE ACE OF DISKS

The Tao Te Ching speaks of *The Ten Thousand Things*—the infinite bountiful variety of what the world has to offer. When we refer to the element of Earth, we’re talking about more than the ground beneath our feet. The Disks talk to us about our bodies, our health, our homes, our labors, and our financial fortunes.

The Ace is the root of all those Ten Thousand Things, and the very first step of a new project. Before something can be made, first it must be imagined. The journey of the Disks might make the most sense if we think about it as the process of opening a new business. On day one, Disks Incorporated has a name. We have decided to begin a new operation and we will see where it takes us.

The central figure on this card is *Atlas* by Lee Lawrie and Rene Paul Chambellan, a well-known sculpture at the entrance of Rockefeller Center. The stone he’s stepping onto is representative of the Shorakkopoch boulder, which lies in a quiet area of Inwood Hill Park, far uptown. Shorakkopoch is the little-known memorial that purports to mark the place where Peter Minuit purchased the island of Manhattan from the Lenape Indians in 1626. Whether this purchase ever really took place, whether it was on this spot, and whether either party had any legitimate right to make the exchange in the first place is sort of beside the point. It’s a pervasive legend of how this city came to be, and if New York has a cornerstone, I would suggest that it is this rock.

The design I’ve used for the disks in this suit was based on the “Five Boroughs” token, the last subway token in circulation before the complete switchover to a digital card system in 2003. It’s combined with the elemental symbol for Earth, pointing inward.

**Completed in September 2012**



## 2: CHANGE

This card represents the very first step in the progression of a material goal—the moment when a thought begins to shape reality. You dig in; you get your hands dirty. It's a kind of magical moment of alchemy. Raw clay becomes a vase, a blank check becomes a new home, a job opening becomes a new career. Our lives see all sorts of changes, some that we drive and some that are forced upon us. Some good, some bad. The Two of Disks speaks to us about the harmony of that flow, up and down. It teaches us to be flexible, to make deliberate choices, and to accept new challenges as they come, each in turn.

In the life of our business, Disks Incorporated, we have made our first prototype product. What was just an idea with the Ace is now a tangible creation. Now, of course, the real work begins.

When we exercise, we're choosing to make a change in ourselves. Perhaps it's to change the way we look in the mirror, or the way we feel about ourselves. Perhaps it's to change our health, or our emotional balance, or just our outlook on life. But it's a deliberate choice, and it's one that requires a certain level of dedication. I was delighted to use my mother as the model for this card. I thought of her immediately when I decided on the basic concept—she's always been very dedicated to staying active and physically fit, and I think she'll agree that it has helped keep her young.

**Model: Rita Grossman  
Completed in October 2012**

### 3: WORKY

This card speaks about time, effort, and concentration in your labors, and a meticulous attention to detail. You already had the inspiration, and now you have the perspiration as well. Who knows whether your efforts will meet with success; all we know is that they certainly never would if you hadn't put in the time.

In the ongoing story of Disks Incorporated: At the Three, we have stocked our shelves and set up our storefront. We've spend weeks talking to contractors and plumbers and electricians, and we're just about ready to open shop for the first time.

In other sets, the Three of Pentacles or Coins often has a strong connection to cooperation, and that meaning ties in nicely—the most important labors are the ones that require building and managing a good team. I would like to thank the team of construction workers who were in the process of putting up a new building on Broadway across the street from my apartment at the time I began this card, and who inspired this design.

We see new buildings go up all the time in this city, but we rarely take the time to marvel at the amazing feats workers are capable of in this age. The most routine construction project we might pass today on the way to work would have seemed utterly miraculous to someone from ages past. To someone who was alive at a time when the Tarot was first coming into use, my city would look like a wonder beyond imagining: a city of impossible heights, surely built by gods, not mere mortals.

**Completed in October 2012**



## 4: POWER

With the Four, Disks Incorporated has met with some real success and we've begun to pull in a significant income. We can afford to pay our employees, we can afford to pay ourselves, we can pay the rent and keep the lights on. It's a newfound power, and it gives us strength and hope.

The Power that the Four speaks of is a material power—the kind that comes from having enough wealth to change your life and the lives of those around you. It doesn't have to be much—maybe it's just about the power that a child gains from their first allowance. Maybe it's the job that lets you finally invest in owning your own home. It's something relatively reliable and established, enough that it's worth fighting for, worth protecting, and makes a real difference in how you live. The danger, of course, is that it inspires you to be hungry for more, and to value that hard-earned wealth above other things in your life.

I picked Times Square for this card, as a representation of real commercial power on display. Right in the heart of the city is a neighborhood where every company that can afford to do so is competing for the attention of the constant stream of tourists passing through. Marketing and advertising are a kind of power, although we often don't pay attention to their influence. There is also a deliberate wordplay here of course, as the sheer electrical power needed to sustain Times Square is pretty amazing. The streets seem bright as daylight, 24 hours a day, mostly just from the billboards and video screens in every direction. It's an amazing spectacle, I don't mind saying, and it's an area so crowded, chaotic, and invasive that most New Yorkers (myself included) tend to avoid it if they possibly can.

**Completed in December 2012**

## 5: WORRY

Disks Incorporated has hit its first real obstacle in the Five of Disks. Between the growing power of the Four and the lofty success of the Six lies the valley of doubt and doom that is the Five. We realize that what seemed like a promising future for our business venture may well lead us to ruin. We look at how our income and our expenses compare and can only see a slow downward spiral that will soon leave us out on the street.

All that we have, we may lose. None of us can say we have not known worry. We fear the loss of our homes, our positions, our jobs, our loved ones, and everything else we have worked so hard for. And there is no worry more universal and basic than the simple fear of our own mortality. We are such fragile beings, living fragile lives, and we hang on simple chance. There are times when the reality of that can paralyze us with fear. Ultimately, worry can never be explained away, because the truth is that all our worst anxieties may well come true. And one day, we will die. Until that day, we can only really live by accepting that and moving beyond it.

Imagine the very moment when the doctor gives you the diagnosis, the one you really did not want to hear. You tune out, cannot quite focus on what is being said. Today you feel fine, but there is a clock ticking away somewhere.

The doctor's name tag, if one looks very closely, reads XIII, a reference to the Death card. On the floor, there is a silhouette that is the precise outline of the figure from card XIII, literally the shadow of Death just outside the door. The uncomfortable and skewed perspective of the scene was tricky, but I like the way it works. The texture I used for the hands is of old peeling paint on a wall.

**Models Elliot & Rita Grossman**  
**Completed in March 2013**

## 6: SUCCESS

What kind of success are we representing with this card? Well, it's the kind of success that enables you to stop and get your shoes shined by someone else and then leave a generous tip. It's success in your career, or in overcoming illness. It's the kind of success that allows us to move past worry and into stability and comfort. It's more than just having enough—it's having enough to share. And so this card is about personal success, but it is also about being generous to those who have less, having a sense of nobility, and being kind to those who serve you.

Disks Incorporated is now supporting not just us, but dozens of our employees. We can afford to take time off and know that the business will still be there when we return. Now we can move on from living month to month and start thinking like a manager, as the head of our own enterprise, responsible for many people who depend on us for their livelihood.

I admit I had a somewhat awkward time getting the reference I needed for this card. I went to the shoeshine station at Grand Central and offered to pay the workers there for a bit of their time and permission to use them as models, but I'm afraid they didn't seem to know what I was going on about. I ended up taking a few shots mostly of the chair, and posing for the rest myself later on. The muted grey tones of the hands remind one of a Renaissance-era religious fresco.

**Completed in January 2013**

## 7: FAILURE

Failure is always an option. There is far too much fear of failure in the world, but the reality is that failure is a natural part of any progress, of any life. To begin any venture with the belief that failure is simply impossible is to set yourself up for much greater disaster. I have failed many, many more times than I can count—in love, in art, in school. Looking back over my life, it is often the failures that have brought the most important lessons.

So the message of this card is, “know that you may fail.” You may fail over and over again. It all may come tumbling down around you. Absolutely nothing may go as you planned. But failure is not the end. You get up, you recover, you learn, you move on. And you try again.

Our business, Disks Incorporated, has fallen on some hard times. We’ve invested unwisely and have taken massive losses. The vendors we trusted did not pull through, and the cost has been staggering. Sacrifices may need to be made if the business is going to stay afloat, and it’s far from certain that we can ever recover.

The scene I’m depicting is the massive blackout of 2003, which knocked out power to NYC along with most of the eastern seaboard and into Canada. I have a particularly strong memory of heading out on the streets on the day the power went out, walking along Columbus Avenue lit only by emergency road flares. It’s an amazing thing to watch this city find ways to overcome disaster and find ways to rebuild. We have faced more than our share of disasters great and small, and after each one I’ve been reminded of how resilient my city is, how impressed I am with the people who live and work here and keep it afloat.

**Completed in January 2013**

## 8: PRUDENCE

With the Seven, the story of our imaginary company had taken a fairly bad turn. The failures we had here at Disks Inc. and worried so much about in the Five had finally come to fruition. And with Failure had come the reminder that after failure, you get up, you recover, you learn. What have we learned? We have learned caution, certainly. We have learned to take our time and check our work thoroughly. We have learned to always have a plan in case things go wrong, because we know that sooner or later they will. We have learned to have patience enough to give our work the time and space it needs to come out right. We are wiser now that we have fallen and picked ourselves up again. We have learned Prudence.

My illustration for this card was distinctly inspired by Pamela Colman Smith's image of the Eight of Pentacles for the Rider-Waite Tarot. In it, we see a man hard at work hammering a nail into one of the eight pentacles for some reason (I think the idea is that he's engraving it? Maybe the thing is just broken?). Anyway, I found myself immediately thinking of a watch repair shop as my modern version. All of those round watch faces immediately seemed like a natural connection to the round disks, and those incredibly tiny little gears and springs require the most extraordinary patience and care to manipulate and repair. And again, there is the simple association with time, as this card is all about taking the proper time with your work.

I looked up a few different watch repair shops online, and then really lucked out with the first one I stumbled into—Daniel Watch & Jewelry Repair on Lexington. When I explained that I was there to gather reference for a piece about watch repair, they showed me around their shop, let me go behind the counter, and posed for me poring over their work. Although the finished piece describes something of an invented space, every element—all the various clocks and watches and such—comes from somewhere in their shop.

**Model: Gjok Gjinaj**  
**Completed in April 2013**

## 9: GAIN

I spent a lovely day at King Spa in New Jersey, with the intent of gathering reference for this card, but I ended up not having any opportunity to take pictures there, perhaps unsurprisingly. So this is essentially an imagined space, inspired by my first spa experience and photos of various locations.

With the Nine, finally, we have pure reward. We have passed through Worry and Failure and finally through hard-learned Prudence and reached a place where we are secure, where we need do nothing but enjoy the fruits of our labors. In the metaphor of our company, it is finally time to trust the reins of business to those we've groomed to fill our positions, and take a long vacation, or perhaps enjoy an early retirement.

The Nine of Disks promises satisfaction, in any material arena. It can mean getting to take a walk outside after being bedridden, or finally getting to enjoy a meal you've worked hard to create. Still, there is a concern as with all earthy cards, that satisfaction can lead us to sloth. At the Nine, we are only a single step from the blindness that comes with total devotion to the material. It would be so very easy simply to never leave the comfort of that pool...

The Thoth depiction of this card arranges the disks in three groups of three, and Crowley makes mention of the power of three multiplied—which I think of as reflecting back to the Works in the Three of Disks that helped us reach this point. I preferred a pyramid arrangement, the pyramid being such a powerful symbol of the lengths a ruler can go to in celebrating themselves when they have the power to do so. The center space is empty, though—the structure is hollow. I may have gotten the idea from a gold-plated pyramid sauna we visited at the spa.

**Model: Sarah Salenger  
Completed in June 2013**

## 10: WEALTH

With each of the four tens, we see what happens when one of the elements is allowed to completely dominate and blot out the other three. With this card, we reach the utmost expression of materialism and the realm of Earth in the Tarot. What is wealth without the idealism of Fire? Without the compassion of Water? Without the rational guidance of Air? It's simply accumulating for the sake of accumulating. Wealth without end, without meaning. Depending on the context, the Ten of Disks may be seen as the well-earned reward at the end of hard work, or the dreamed-of completion of some important task. Still, there is the warning there that what is gained is only material—glittering and tantalizing, but potentially blinding you to other things in your life.

The tale of Disks Incorporated ends here. What began as the dream has become the institution. Our company has gone global and pulls in billions every quarter. There is almost nothing we could not buy or do if we wanted it—and we find we have to ask ourselves, what should we use all that power to do? Along the path to success, have we left behind our principles, and become subject only to the demands of the almighty dollar?

For this card, I tried to compose a semi-cubist sort of walk through New York's Diamond Exchange. There is a one-block stretch of 47th Street in Manhattan that is like a bazaar out of another time, a very strange experience to pass through. There are four giant lighted pylons that border the district, and declare clearly that there is only one business on this block. There are only two reasons to enter that space: are you looking to buy, or to sell?

**Completed in June 2013**

## KNIGHT OF DISKS: THE GOURMET CHEF

The court of Disks is a quiet group. Determined, demanding, and devoted to their crafts, they tend to let their work speak for them. The Knight is, as ever, a symbol of passion here in the context of material concerns, the Fire in the Earth. His fire is bright and powerful, but he keeps it within himself. It drives him to ever higher levels of perfection with his art. The Knight of Disks is a craftsman, never satisfied with his work, always thinking of how he can make the next creation better than the last. He needs no rest from his work. Even in his dreams, he is planning what he will create next. Although he is pragmatic and cautious in his life, it sometimes seems there is no room for anything or anyone but his chosen craft; the Knight does not easily tolerate distractions.

I chose to depict my Knight as the head chef of his own restaurant. He is dignified and proud of the level of excellence he maintains, but never one to brag. I have known my model Teddy my entire life, and while he does not, in fact, cook, he is unquestionably a man of unique passion and taste. He is a collector, a writer, a geologist, and a raconteur without parallel.

I've subtly included a small horse image in each of the Knights, as the traditional image was always of a man in equestrian mount. The one on this card is so tiny that you'll likely need a magnifying glass to pick it out on the card, so don't go giving yourself eye strain looking. Teddy happened to be wearing a small watch fob with a horse's head on it when he showed up for the shoot, so I made a point of including it hanging out of the pocket on his apron. Since that's hardly prominent in the image, we can certainly also pretend that the meat in the foreground originated from a traditional French *boucherie chevaline*.

**Model: Ted Schuster  
Completed in November 2012**



## QUEEN OF DISKS: THE MATRIARCH

The Queen of Disks is Water in the context of Earth, the emotional center in the material realm. She is the power that turns hot food into family dinner, an unexpected windfall into a touching gift, a house into a home. She is strong and stable, sensible and reliable. But she is also sensitive and caring, the warm light that holds people together. Having neither Air nor Fire, the Queen of Disks will never be a leader in her own right. Her greatness shows in the support she gives to others.

My model here is my grandmother, Janice Grossman, who passed away several years ago. I've known for a while I wanted to use her for this card—Janice is inseparable in my mind from all the trappings of her elegant Upper West Side life. Her home, her clothing, her jewelry, her hair.

Many of the elements of the dining room I've chosen to depict are long gone—the hutch, the table, the mirror, the chairs, even my grandparents' old dishware, were eventually sold at auction. The sunburst behind Janice's head is inspired by a mirror she had on her wall, also sold to help pay for Janice's nursing home care. Only that chandelier still hangs just as it did. I pieced together the scene from bits of old photos and from my own unreliable memories. I employed my sister Carolyn to play the part of Janice—as it happens, she's inherited much of Janice's old wardrobe, and so could easily put together an outfit that was perfect for a photo shoot.

I transformed the pair of columns framing the room to resemble spiraling horns as a reference to the markhor goat horns that feature heavily on the Thoth version of this card. The orange that I've put on the Seder plate would definitely not have been there at our family Seder in '93, when I've set this scene, but it's there in recent years. I encourage you to look up the symbolism of its placement if you're not familiar with the practice.

**Model: Janice Grossman  
(with help from Carolyn Grossman)  
Completed in September 2012**

## PRINCE OF DISKS: THE DAY TRADER

The Princes are our thinkers, our cerebral archetypes. Armed only with the tools of their mind, they charge ahead, making order from chaos and finding truth in confusion. Our Prince of Air was a Computer Hacker, our Prince of Fire was a Journalist. Here, our Prince of Earth trades stocks and makes money from nothing but math and confidence.

The Prince of Disks is a driven individual—like all the court of Disks in their way. His work may seem soulless and sterile to others, but when the Prince looks at a wall of numbers, he only sees opportunity. He is a pragmatic problem-solver, and tirelessly industrious. He is patient and unwavering in his job, but he can seem cold to those around him. Perhaps he doesn't think that he can afford a private life, not when there is still so much to do. But never doubt that he will accomplish what he sets his mind to. He has his sight on early retirement, and all the comfort his earnings will buy him one day.

There are a number of visual nods to elements from the Thoth version of the card here. The bull was a perfect carry-over in my mind. It's a fitting "spirit animal" for the Prince, and I've included it here as a miniature desk sculpture of the famous Wall Street Bull (more accurately referred to as *Charging Bull*, by the artist Arturo Di Modica). The wheels of the chariot are, in my mind, sort of referenced with the pair of rolling office chairs. There is an armillary sphere on the poster in the top right, which you may notice is stolen from an earlier card in this suit.

**Model: Tom Russell**  
**Completed in February 2013**

## PRINCESS OF DISKS: THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

She is the ultimate personification of elemental Earth in the Tarot, and is generally counted as the last card in the set. The Princess of Disks is the caretaker of growing things, a protector and a nurturer. Like all the court of Disks, her greatest strength is in her stability, her endurance, her determination. She understands the importance of her charge. The card is often very strongly associated with motherhood and pregnancy, as the Princess of Disks is the protector of new life and new beginnings. I saw it as telling the story of a woman who has devoted her professional life to taking care of other people's children, giving vital guidance and care in our earliest days but often forgotten as we grow up.

I've surrounded my Princess with symbols of growth, life, and creation. Wearing a smock that has utterly failed to keep her from being covered in paint, the Kindergarten Teacher takes a precious moment while the kids play in the schoolyard to reflect on her work. She is exhausted and sticky and sore, but she has made a difference in the lives of so many children who pass through her classroom.

The mural in the background is from the schoolyard at P.S. 111 on 10th Avenue. If you were able to go outside in the yard with the kids to take a closer look, you'd see graffiti-style letters spelling out "Hell's Kitchen", among flags from around the world. The skyline in the background includes the pyramid top of the Worldwide Plaza building on 50th Street. I am aware, of course, that what little we see of the interior of the school in this image bears a lot more resemblance to a country day school than to the more institutional design of the N.Y. public schools from which I emerged. But then, the kindergarten room in my rose-tinted memories would also probably look quite a lot different to me as an adult.

**Model: Diana Kudajarova  
Completed in April 2013**



*Robin Scott is an artist, illustrator, graphic designer, and web developer. She is a transgender woman, a feminist, a radical optimist, a futurist, and a utopian socialist. She is also a hostess, a chef, a comic book fan, a gamer, and a huge geek. She lives with her wife in a castle in the sky on the Upper West Side of New York City. More of her work can be found online at RobinScottArt.com.*



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