



# Tarot Grand Luxe

SAMPLE



by **Ciro Marchetti**

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Made in China

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Published by  
U.S. GAMES SYSTEMS, INC.  
179 Ludlow Street  
Stamford, CT 06902 USA  
[www.usgamesinc.com](http://www.usgamesinc.com)



# Introduction

The Tarot Grand Luxe is my latest tarot deck project. The special edition was self-published and geared principally to collectors. I made the assumption that anyone reading the accompanying booklet is already reasonably familiar with tarot and specifically with the Rider-Waite-Smith™ deck upon which the images of this project are, for the most part, based. So I felt it would be somewhat redundant to provide yet another companion book or document that explains the historical content and meaning behind each image of every card. Many cards of this deck are in familiar enough territory relative to the RWS that I don't think further explanation is necessary. Nevertheless, since in some cases I have deviated to some degree from those traditional core images, I prepared this booklet as a brief summary to offer some insight into

my personal ideas and objectives. Depending on the card, this may constitute a few lines, in others merely a summary of keywords. I would emphasize however that these are only my personal ideas and views, and ones with which you may not always concur. But should that be the case, hopefully the images themselves will still offer a flexibility of interpretation that you can work with.



To provide some initial context, we should acknowledge the obvious, namely that the pen and ink illustrations of Pamela Colman Smith and the earlier Tarot de Marseilles woodcuts that preceded them, between them represent the visual foundations upon which the tarot genre is built. They serve not just as the core sources of tarot traditions but in the opinion of many, are infused with aesthetic artistic merits along with religious, spiritual, political and esoteric symbolism. While you can't negate the importance of these earlier deck images, I do question some of what has been subsequently written and concluded from them over the centuries that followed. The reality (in my view) is that in many cases the illustrative style of these

earlier decks do not provide sufficient definition to clearly portray much of what has been ascribed to them. In my mind, much of what has been written about them is conjecture, influenced by varying perspectives, such as moral or social values that have changed over time and vary between geographical regions. Not to mention the personal beliefs, perspectives and agendas of the individual authors along the way. The results are a veritable pot-pourri of interpretations ranging from well researched conclusions to imaginative but less credible theories. Nevertheless, despite the inconsistency between them, many interpretations have gained varying degrees of traction and credibility from their respective followers, if only because of frequent retelling and reconfirmation over time. But in the absence of any concrete historical origins that can be referenced to serve as the definitively correct or intended meaning behind those early images, we are left with a rather inconclusive scenario where tarot imagery remains somewhat enigmatic.

As a designer, this is both a dilemma and an opportunity. Many choose to follow tradition faithfully, accurately reproducing the composition, color and line work of those earlier

decks. This approach seems to be popular even today with numerous (accurate) re-workings of the older decks. These endeavors are to be applauded as some are quite beautiful, and some certainly meet with the approval of the more traditional members of the tarot community. But such an exercise, while representing a technical challenge of sorts, creatively is one that offers little interest to me. Furthermore, I cannot deny that in many cases I simply do not see in those early images what others claim to see. The actions, gestures, expressions etc. of the various characters occupying those cards are simply not depicted clearly enough to support all the interpretations that have been subsequently ascribed to them. I am simply not convinced that every detail within any given composition was deliberately included with such symbolic intent. A flower, animal, or ray of light might in some cases simply have been included as decorative content. But even if such elements were intentionally symbolic, that symbolism might not have served cross-culturally. In many cases I feel that people see form and function not because it's there but as a result of it having been pointed out and suggested to them as such. I know this to certainly be the case in my own work, where for example people

have often attributed meaning to some feature, even negative space, that may coincidentally resemble some other form. While it would be tempting in such cases to take credit for such “clever” visual play and claim it to have been deliberate, I can’t in all honesty do so. I refer to this phenomenon as the “poodle in the cloud.” What is fundamentally a random shape, once pointed out as resembling the form of a poodle, can often elicit an “ah, I see it now” response from viewers. In tarot, this ambiguity serves a positive role. The easily recognized “poodle in the sky” is the very feature that allows the lesser illustrated patterned designs of the Marseilles pips to be read intuitively. Where the interplay of shape and form offers infinite possibilities of interpretation. To a similar, albeit lesser degree, the pen and ink tarot illustrations of Pamela Colman Smith, which are not particularly detailed, can be treated in a comparable manner. Her illustrations are clearly beloved by many and the importance of her role in tarot’s history is beyond question. But at the risk of offending many in the tarot community (which I often do) I have to say that for me personally her style and composition do not always provide me with clarity. Body proportions, poses, expressions, direction of pointing fingers etc.

are by comparison to her illustrator peers of that historic period, lacking in terms of draftsmanship and detail required to provide a clear narrative of the scene. Once again, I say this not as a critique but to suggest that it provides some flexibility of interpretation. I cannot emphasize how important I consider that to be. If tarot did have a definitive historical basis, if in the imagery of each card there was an absolutely clear depiction, and their meaning universally accepted, the result would be a rather rigidly prescribed set of images that would offer far less room for intuitive input. Thus, the vagueness I'm referring to and for all the reasons I've mentioned, is actually tarot's strength and the basis for its appeal. What we have is a combination of relative structure and basics but one that is still malleable, one that can be molded by the reader to best reflect the nuances and circumstances of an individual reading. My approach has been to produce imagery that is relatively familiar to the same corresponding cards from earlier decks and maintain that same ambiguity, but with a more detailed illustrative style and occasional personal visual twists.



In terms of technique, my artistic medium of choice is digital. In recent years there seems to be an ever-increasing production of tarot decks, in part because of this new medium that allows for the use of direct photography or at least manipulated photographic sources. This might suggest a “relative” ease and speed, but as with all mediums, there are variations in how it’s used and the final product. Art is subjective, its quality should not be judged by the time it takes to produce it. Nevertheless, for those who are interested in such things, my process involves very simple initial sketches that serve as a starting point. These almost always get changed along the way to the final image, but they serve as a base from which to then search for usable reference material. In the case of faces, I often combine multiple sources, selecting references of mouths, eyes, hair from different faces, which I then mix, match, distort and warp to create new ones. I use the same method for background, landscapes, skies etc. These are then combined with my own illustrated elements, all manipulated further to create a common visual consistency. The process continues with numerous minor manipulations, for example adding light and shadow so that the various elements acknowledge and respond in

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