

# Renaissance Tarot Deck



by Brian Williams

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The Renaissance Tarot deck comprises 78 cards divided into 22 Major Arcana and 56 Minor Arcana, plus a title card and a presentation card. Titles on the cards appear in Italian and English. Original etchings of the Major Arcana, signed and limited to an edition of 50 for each card, are available from the artist, in care of U.S. Games Systems, Inc., Stamford, Conn. 06902 U.S.A. The artist's gratitude is extended to family and friends, and to Italy.

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# RENAISSANCE TAROT DECK

## INTRODUCTION TO TAROT

The complete seventy-eight-card tarot pack is divided into two sections, twenty-two Major Arcana and fifty-six Minor Arcana cards. The Major Arcana are allegorical cards and are also known as the Triumphs, the Greater Arcana and the Atouts. The English titles of the Major Arcana of the Renaissance Tarot are the following.

0 The Fool	XI Strength
I The Magician	XII The Hanged Man
II The Priestess	XIII Death
III The Empress	XIV Temperance
IV The Emperor	XV The Devil
V The Hierophant	XVI The Tower
VI The Lovers	XVII The Stars
VII The Chariot	XVIII The Moon
VIII Justice	XIX The Sun
IX The Hermit	XX The Angel
X Chance	XXI The World

The Minor Arcana are divided into four suits: swords, staves, cups and coins. In each suit are four court cards, king, queen, knight and page, and ten numbered cards. Today's ordinary playing cards descend from the Minor Arcana of the tarot: the knight and page were combined to form the jack of the fifty-two-card deck and swords became spades; staves, clubs; cups, hearts; and coins, diamonds.

The personages of the tarot embody many of the archetypes of universal experience, drawing from legend and myth and even, for instance, Shakespeare's plays. Its origin, however, is unknown. The appealing but apocryphal theory of an Egyptian origin, introduced by Court de Gebelin, a French *philosophe* of the eighteenth century, was evoked by the mystery of the fascinating cards. Another legend is that the tarot was brought to Europe by the gypsies. It is known that the cards appeared in Europe in the mid 1400s. The earliest extant cards date from the early fifteenth century and were commissioned by the Visconti and Sforza ducal families of Milan. The beautiful Milanese miniatures, hand-painted and illumined with gold leaf, are ascribed to Bonifacio Bembo. German print-

makers later produced splendid engraved decks. Uses of the cards probably included "improving" games for children and gambling for adults. It is possible that the ranks of the allegorical images of the Major Arcana were based on the idea of hierarchy in Petrarch's famous poem *I Trionphi*, The Triumphs.

An early published account of divination by cards, *Le Sorti*, by Francesco Marcolini da Forlì, 1540, propounds a method utilizing only the ace through ten of coins, suggesting a closer tie to old methods of fortune-telling with dice rather than card reading as we know it. Yet, an earlier account, *Caos del Triperuno*, by Merlini Cocai, 1527, uses the Major Arcana for divination. The way in which the cards are used in the drama, with the images united into a sort of story, is very much the way many card readers use the tarot today.

The Renaissance Tarot has some features that do not derive from extant decks dating from the Renaissance, but are in harmony with interests of the period. All twelve of the deities of Olympus, and other classical gods and demi-gods, have been associated with the Major Arcana cards. In the descriptions of each card, the Greek name is given, with the Roman name in parentheses. Four classical myth cycles form the basis of the numbered cards of the four suits. An interlocking four-part system of planets, constellations, seasons and so on, based on the four elements, has been imposed on the court cards.

No one knows the original intention of early card-makers, or what figures—legendary or historical—the Major Arcana were meant to represent. It is known, though, that classical deities and myths, and the parallels between astrological and elemental attributes and the human physique and psyche were subjects that fascinated the Renaissance mind. Therefore, it is hoped that the embellishments of the artist will add to the integrity of the cards and the pleasure of the reader.

## PRESENTATION CARD

A female figure, representing the yin, or feminine, principle, holds the coin and cup of the earth and water suits. She stands on a crescent moon. A male figure, standing on the sun and representing the yang,

or male, principle, holds the air and fire symbols of staff and sword. Between the sun and the moon lies a disk with the yin and yang symbols inscribed within the eight-pointed star of the four elements—fire, air, water and earth—and the four properties of the elements—hot, cold, wet and dry. In the four corners are small figures representing (clockwise from upper left) dawn, day, dusk and night. Like the reclining giants of Michelangelo's Medici tombs, these personifications are masculine or feminine according to linguistic or symbolic tradition. A framing ribbon has two Latin mottoes: *Est modus in rebus*, "There is an order in things," and *Mobilis in mobile*, "Moving in [a world of] movement."

## BACK DESIGN

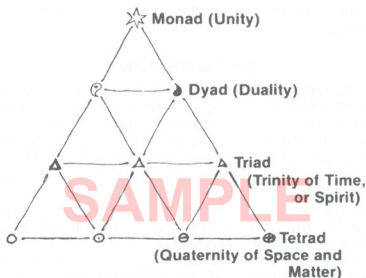
The back design of the Renaissance Tarot sets out the four-fold cosmology. Signs and symbols of the four suits are at each corner. The bird of air is for staves; the salamander, reputed to live in the fires of the forge, is for swords; the fish is for water and cups; and the turtle of earth, shown in some ancient stories supporting the world on its back, is for coins. The four corners describe a rectangle or square, a universal model of the physical world with its four directions, four winds, four seasons and so on. The four extremes also determine a wheel, rotating to the heaviest and most stable element, earth, to the lightest and most volatile element, fire.

Each element has two qualities. Earth is cold and dry, fire is hot and dry, air is warm and moist and water is cold and wet. Thus the circle turns back to earth from fire by way of their shared characteristic, dryness.

The four suits also fall into two halves, like the red suits of hearts and diamonds and the black suits of spades and clubs in the regular playing card deck. As such, the suits embody the primal complementary dichotomy: yin and yang, moon and sun, female and male, receptive and assertive. The cups and coins, the heavy and stable yin suits, rest at the bottom of the design under a female figure. The swords and staves, the light, volatile yang suits, stand above the male figure. The intertwined hands mark the physical and

spiritual center where all opposites meet and partake of each other.

Enveloping and connecting everything in the design is an enlaced network of triple circles. As the square formed by the four elements is an archetypal diagram of the material world, so is the circle a symbol of transcendent perfection. Four is concrete, three is metaphysical. Three is the number of past, present, future; Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Brahma (cardinal-creating), Vishnu (fixed-sustaining) and Shiva (mutable-destroying).



**THE PYTHAGOREAN TETRAD** The ten principles are illustrated by the nine small triangles plus the overall triangle.

The mandala of the back design can be read outward from the center as a version of the Pythagorean Tetrad, the group of four principles (in Plato's *Timaeus*, and in Francesco di Giorgio and Robert Fludd). The Monad, the one, the center and union of all things, generates the Dyad, the two, yin and yang. The Dyad unfolds in the Triad of becoming, enduring and ending, set on the foundation of the Tetrad, the four elements locked together in matter. Ten principles result, ten being, according to Pythagoras, a perfect number, especially as arranged as ten equilateral triangles in a pyramid, as shown in the diagram "The Pythagorean Tetrad."

## THE 22 MAJOR ARCANA

### 0 THE FOOL

The Fool is dressed in an elaborate slashed costume of a sixteenth-century court jester. The plumes in his hair signify folly, and the staff he holds is surmounted with grapes and a tiny skull, symbols of Bacchic abandon and terror. The Fool's companion deity is, in fact, Dionysus (Bacchus), and he is accompanied by the leopard Dionysus brought back from his wandering revels in India. A lily of the valley flowers at the Fool's feet, symbolizing blithe innocence and simplicity ("Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. . . ." Matthew 6:28) and the advent of spring. The Fool signifies rebirth and new beginnings, as does the constellation Aries; the pagan god Dionysus, who was dismembered and made whole again, as his grape vine is pruned to be renewed in spring; and the Christian savior, whose resurrection is symbolized by the lily and whose feast, like those of Dionysus and Demeter of Eleusis, is celebrated with the grape and grain.

**Divinatory Meanings:** The personality in the primal state, the willful child in all of us. Instinct. Innocence. Impulsive actions. Setting off in a new direction in life. Liberation of the impulses. Insight and wit from instinct rather than instruction.

**Reverse Meanings:** A false step. Impetuous beginning. Rash and irrational behavior. Childishness. Bacchic intoxication, oblivion and violence.

### I THE MAGICIAN

The Magician, like his companion deity Hermes (Mercury), wears a winged hat and holds a snake-entwined staff. The crane was sacred to Hermes and also to the Egyptian god Thoth, inventor of language and scribe to the gods. The flock pattern of migrating cranes inspired Hermes to invent the first Greek letter, alpha. The Magician stands behind a three-legged table on which rest several basic forms symbolizing the world of matter: a cube, a sphere, a pyramid and a polyhedron with twelve faces. As the personage after the instinctual impulse of the Fool and before the spiritual sublimity and intellectual mastery of the

succeeding cards, the Magician flies between the inspiration of Dionysus and the expression of Apollo.

**Divinatory Meanings:** Mastery of words and of matter. Eloquence, including eloquent silence and Hermetic wisdom. Mediator, messenger and communicator. The Magician may be a sage or just a quick talker. He is a master-manipulator of the material world, but the miracles he effects may be true physical and metaphysical transformation or mere illusion and technical tricks. With Hermes one never knows: he is the god of orators and liars, merchants and thieves, trickery and arcane science.

**Reverse Meanings:** Mercurial chicanery. Fraudulent activity. Demagoguery. Sophistry. Misused technology. Sideshow thrills.

## II THE PRIESTESS

The Priestess, dressed like a Botticelli goddess with hieratic touches, holds a scroll of knowledge and a lotus flower whose leaves are eyes. The eyes are attributes of Saint Lucy, "Holy Light," an aspect of celestial wisdom. Her companion deity is Demeter (Ceres), goddess of fertility, whose accompanying symbol is the cat, a creature that from Egyptian times has signified serene feminine wisdom.

**Divinatory Meanings:** The abstract, spiritual and intellectual face of the anima, which is the feminine nature of the soul. Primordial feminine wisdom. The cyclic and balancing forces of nature. The ancient underground tradition of healing arts, magic and spiritual mystery.

**Reverse Meanings:** Obfuscation. Mumbo jumbo. Heresy.

## III THE EMPRESS

The Empress holds a fan of worldly pleasure and the orb of sovereignty. Hera (Juno) and the peacock accompany her. The queen of the pagan gods gave the hundred eyes of the vanquished Argus to the fowl to adorn its tail, and adopted the bird as her attribute. Later, Mary the Christian queen of heaven inherited the symbol of the peacock and its "eyes" came to represent the all-seeing eyes of Providence.

**Divinatory Meanings:** Feminine fertility and power. Civilization. Domestic tradition. Family and childrear-



ing. The active, fecund aspect of the anima. The mother and the queen, on earth and in heaven.

**Reverse Meanings:** Stifling domesticity. Bourgeois limitations. High-handed matriarchy. Junoesque jealousy.

#### IV THE EMPEROR

The Emperor wields the staff of rule and wears an ermine-trimmed cloak. Flanking him are Zeus (Jupiter; Jove), holding the lightning bolts of his power as ruler of Olympus, and Zeus's eagle. In the distance is a castle-villa.

**Divinatory Meanings:** Worldly authority. Professional success. Social power. The life of action and decision, especially in politics and business. Patriarch, clan leader and *pater familias*.

**Reverse Meanings:** Tyranny. Pomposity. Jove-like self-indulgence.

#### V THE HIEROPHANT

The Hierophant holds a bishop's crook and a tiny dragon, symbol of evil vanquished. The crook and dragon are attributes of Saint Hilary of Poitiers. He wears the papal tiara. In the upper corners are Poseidon (Neptune) and the horse invented by the sea god. Poseidon and his brothers Zeus and Hades drew lots for rulership of the world after the successful revolt against their parents the Titans. Zeus won the sky, Poseidon the sea and Hades the underworld. In like manner, the Emperor holds temporal authority while the Hierophant rules the spiritual realm.

**Divinatory Meanings:** The abstract, spiritual and intellectual side of the animus, or masculine nature of the soul. Spiritual authority. Religious tradition. Avuncular wisdom. The old order and the old school.

**Reverse Meanings:** Dogmatic beliefs. Spiritual authoritarianism. Enfeebled philosophizing.

#### VI THE LOVERS

The Lovers hold hands under an arch adorned with Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of love, with her son Eros (Cupid), and the doves that draw the goddess's chariot.

**Divinatory Meanings:** Romantic passion. Amorous attachment. The stages of love: discovery, attraction,

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