

# *Tarot, Leonardo, and the Renaissance...*

*by Diane A.S. Stuckart, author of the Leonardo da Vinci mystery series from Berkley Prime Crime*

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## **Introduction**

**Of the various New Age practices that have gained popular appeal, the Tarot is perhaps the most widely recognized, even among those who keep their feet firmly planted in the mundane world. Similar at first glance to everyday playing cards, a Tarot deck contains four suits: swords, staves, coins, and cups. Each suit consists of 14 cards numbered one through ten, plus four court cards (a page accompanies the familiar knight, queen, and king). Those four suits together comprise what is called the Minor Arcana. What separates the Tarot from the "Bicycle" brand deck tucked away in your game cabinet, however, is a fifth suit...an extra 22 trump cards of various symbolic figures known as the Major Arcana. The Tarot reader shuffles all 72 cards and then draws a few at random to be laid out in a prescribed pattern known as a spread. From there, the reader interprets the cards based upon their traditional meanings.**

**It is that stylized layout, along with the cards' colorful and often arcane iconography, that adds an air of mystery to the Tarot. A Tarot reading may be further ritualized when conducted atop a tabletop draped in silk, and accompanied by crystals, incense, and candlelight. Despite all those theatrical trappings, however, the Tarot is no fortune-telling game. Rather, its adherents use the cards as a way to delve into the subconscious. Reminiscent of Jungian dream interpretation-- or even Rorschach blots!--each card in a Tarot deck contains archetypal symbolism that an experienced reader can piece together to form an answer to a specific question, or else to offer an overview of a person's current life status.**

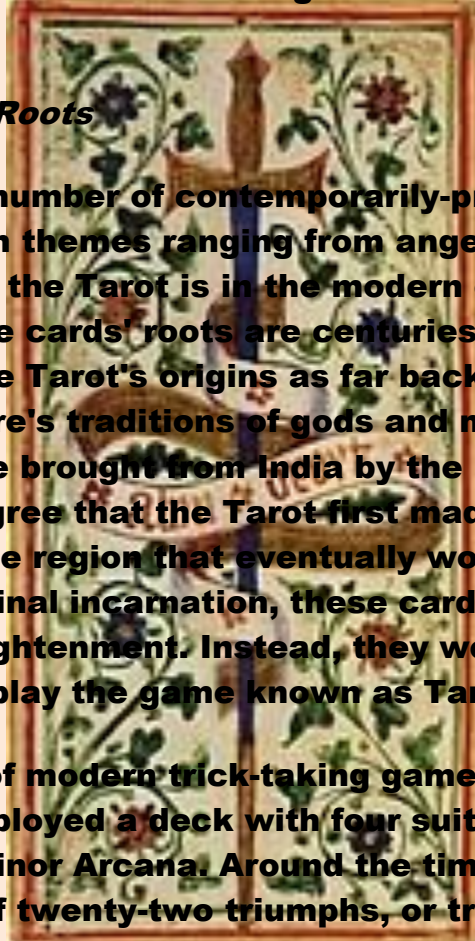
**The Tarot enjoyed a particular surge in popularity in the U.S. back in the 1960s and '70s, when its images were as familiar sights as peace symbols and love beads. The Fool, the Magician, the High**

**Priestess...these and the other Major Arcana figures found their way into popular culture almost overnight. Tarot references abounded in advertising, books, trendy clothing, and movies (the 1973 James Bond film, "Live and Let Die", even spawned its own specially-designed Tarot cards). The most recognizable deck of the time was one first printed in the early part of the 20th century: the Rider Waite, alternately known as the Waite-Smith deck. With its colorful if somewhat simplistic rendition of the trump cards, it quickly resonated with Tarot devotees and became the "go-to" deck for a majority of Tarot readers.**

### ***Tarot's Renaissance Roots***

**Nowadays, the number of contemporarily-printed Tarot decks is in the thousands, with themes ranging from angels to gemstones to vampires. Familiar as the Tarot is in the modern era, however, it is easy to forget that the cards' roots are centuries-old. A few romantics have tried to trace the Tarot's origins as far back as ancient Egypt, pointing to that culture's traditions of gods and magic. Others claim the ornate cards were brought from India by the Rom, or Gypsies. Most scholars, however, agree that the Tarot first made an appearance in the 14th century in the region that eventually would become known as Italy. But in their original incarnation, these cards were not meant for divination or self-enlightenment. Instead, they were but a bit of light amusement, used to play the game known as Tarocchi.**

**A predecessor of modern trick-taking games like Hearts or Spades, Tarocchi employed a deck with four suits which correlated to the modern Tarot's Minor Arcana. Around the time of Leonardo da Vinci, that fifth suit of twenty-two triumphs, or trump cards, was added to the mix. These triumphs were firmly based in both Catholic and Classical Roman symbolism. Arranged in their proper order, they mapped out a hero's journey of sorts...a motif that would have been quite familiar to the people of the time. In a society where literacy was at a premium, such symbolic representations--whether painted in a series of Church frescoes, or acted out in Feast Day pageants--served as a primer on how the God-fearing should conduct their lives.**



**Of course, few of the common folk at whom these archetypes were directed actually could afford their own deck of Tarocchi cards. Their creation was a painstaking art, with each card made from hand-pressed paper cut to shape and then individually painted, making for a tidy commission for an artist who specialized in miniatures. Thus, Tarocchi cards were usually found in the possession of the upper class and the nobility. And since cards were mostly a female diversion--men of the time tended more toward dice or chess for their entertainment--appearance was an important part of their attraction. Many decks were lavishly gilded, further adding to their expense. Even so, these decks were not tucked away as keepsakes, but were used with great frequency and were even symbolically tossed into bonfires on feast days. For those reasons, few examples survived into the succeeding centuries.**

**In short order, Tarocchi spread to France, where it took on the name by which it now is most commonly known. The game eventually made its way throughout the rest of Europe, with each new region putting its own spin on the renditions of the Minor and Major Arcana. But with travel and the passage of time, it was not just the cards' imagery that changed. By the mid-16th century, the Tarot triumphs had morphed into something more esoteric. No longer were they the iconic images of the Church past; instead, they had taken on modern--and slightly darker--meanings. Two of the figures with liturgical connections, the Pope and the Popesse, were replaced by the secular High Priestess and Hierophant. And the Christ-like being who once was the centerpiece of the World trump was shunted aside for a female surrounded by mystical trappings. Symbols harkening to the Cabbala or astrology were incorporated to the cards' artwork, as well, further strengthening the Tarot's connection to the occult.**

**By the 18th century, the Tarot deck had become a common tool of those who walked the arcane path, with the Tarot of Marseilles one of the best known of that time (and still in use almost 300 years later). During that same era, the pseudonymous Etteilla, a leading occultist, designed the first Tarot deck specifically for use in divination. The Tarot's evolution continued into the 19th century, with other decks joining the existing mix, while its devotees put forth ever-more exotic explanations as to the cards' origins.**

**A high point for the Tarot came just before the 20th century, when a mystical order known as the Golden Dawn for all intents and purposes claimed the Tarot for its own. Though influential in its time, the organization only lasted a little more than a decade; still, it was two of that order's members, Arthur Edward Waite and Pamela Colman Smith, who were responsible for the now-ubiquitous Waite-Smith deck which was first published in 1909. Under Waite's direction, this modern new deck moved away from the magical symbolism that had dominated its imagery in the previous century. Smith's compelling iconography was instead firmly based on the classical traditions of the "journey" that had been the foundation of the original 15th century Tarot decks. So powerful was her art that numerous decks borrowed heavily from it in the succeeding decades, allowing for a category of decks known as Rider clones**

***The Tarot and Leonardo da Vinci***

**It was while I was doing research for my first Leonardo da Vinci mystery, THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT, that I stumbled across references to a particular Tarocchi deck dating from the mid-15th century. Known as the Visconti-Sforza Tarot, it was created by Bonifacio Bembo, a painter and miniaturist occasionally in the service of the noble Visconti and Sforza families of Milan...this, about a quarter century before Leonardo took up his post as court artist there. The deck is one of a very few surviving Tarocchi sets from that time period. Fragile, and with its once-brilliant images worn almost to the paper, the deck is missing four cards: the Three of Swords, the Knight of Pentacles, the Devil, and the Tower.**

**No one knows for sure what happened to them, though the suit cards likely were lost at some point, or else irrevocably damaged. As for the two absent triumphs, some metaphysical historians suggest that the Devil and the Tower may not even have been part of the original deck. Other Tarot scholars dispute that, opining that the cards may have deliberately been removed by a subsequent owner of the deck because of their disturbing imagery. But whatever the explanation, the small mystery of the four vanished cards made for an**

**interesting bit of speculation, and it was the jumping off point for my second book in the Leonardo series, *PORTRAIT OF A LADY*.**

**So, did the historical Leonardo da Vinci have any true connection to the Tarot? None that I could discover. Still, Leonardo's body of public work was similarly rich in the sort of symbolism and religious iconography that was the hallmark of the original Tarot cards. Had he put his mind to it, Leonardo could have conceived of a deck that likely would have eclipsed any other Tarot rendition, before or after. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that a recent new Tarot has been published whose triumphs and suits are based upon the paintings and sketches of the Master, himself.**



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