

# Tarot

The **tarot** (/ˈtæroʊ/; first known as **trionfi** and later as **tarocchi**, **tarock**, and others) is a pack of playing cards (most commonly numbering 78), used from the mid-15th century in various parts of Europe to play a group of card games such as Italian tarocchini and French tarot. From the late 18th century until the present time the tarot has also found use by mystics and occultists in efforts at divination or as a map of mental and spiritual pathways.

The tarot has four suits (which vary by region, being the French suits in Northern Europe, the Latin suits in Southern Europe, and the German suits in Central Europe). Each of these suits has pip cards numbering from ace to ten and four face cards for a total of 14 cards. In addition, the tarot is distinguished by a separate 21-card trump suit and a single card known as the Fool. Depending on the game, the Fool may act as the top trump or may be played to avoid following suit.

François Rabelais gives *tarau* as the name of one of the games played by Gargantua in his *Gargantua and Pantagruel*;<sup>[1]</sup> this is likely the earliest attestation of the French form of the name.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> Tarot cards are used throughout much of Europe to play card games. In English-speaking countries, where these games are largely unplayed, tarot cards are now used primarily for divinatory purposes. Occultists call the trump cards and the Fool "the major arcana" while the ten pip and four court cards in each suit are called minor arcana. The cards are traced by some occult writers to ancient Egypt or the Kabbalah but there is no documented evidence of such origins or of the usage of tarot for divination before the 18th century.



Visconti-Sforza tarot deck. The Devil card is a 20th-century replacement for the card missing from the original 15th-century deck.

## Etymology

The English and French word **tarot** derives from the Italian *tarocchi*, which has no known origin or etymology. One theory relates the name "tarot" to the Taro River in northern Italy, near Parma; the game seems to have originated in northern Italy, in Milan or Bologna.<sup>[2]</sup> Other writers believe it comes from the Arabic word *طرق* *turuq*, which means 'ways'. Alternatively, it may be from the Arabic *ترك* *taraka*, 'to leave, abandon, omit, leave behind'.<sup>[3]</sup> According to a French etymology, the Italian *tarocco* derived from Arabic *طرح* *tarḥ*,<sup>[4]</sup> 'rejection; subtraction, deduction, discount'.<sup>[5]</sup> There is also the question of whether the word tarot is related to Harut and Marut,<sup>[citation needed]</sup> who were mentioned in a short account in the Qur'an. According to this account, a group of Israelites learned magic, for demonstration and to test them, from two angels called Harut and Marut.<sup>[6]</sup> What can be taken into account here is the phonetic resemblance of tarot تاروت to Harut هاروت and Marut ماروت. Similar stories about the two angels are also told in other sources than Qur'an such as the Jewish Midrash. According to Midrash the two angels were punished by getting hung by their feet in Babylon. This position is depicted on a Tarot card named the Hanged Man which is common in majority of decks and illustrates a man hung by one foot from a wooden cross. There is also an interesting correlation between the terms "Tarot" and "Torat" in that they are actually the same in reverse. Considering that "Torat" is a common pronunciation of Torah (تورات) in middle east, this strengthens the theory that Tarot cards have cipher messages from ancient Jewish sources.

## History

Playing cards first entered Europe in the late 14th century, probably from Mamluk Egypt, with suits very similar to the tarot suits of Swords, Staves, Cups and Coins (also known as disks, and pentacles) and those still used in traditional Italian, Spanish and Portuguese decks.<sup>[7]</sup>

The first known documented tarot cards were created between 1430 and 1450 in Milan, Ferrara and Bologna in northern Italy when additional trump cards with allegorical illustrations were added to the common four-suit pack. These new decks were originally called *carte da trionfi*, triumph cards, and the additional cards known simply as *trionfi*, which became "trumps" in English. The first literary evidence of the existence of *carte da trionfi* is a written statement in the court records in Florence, in 1440. The oldest surviving tarot cards are from fifteen fragmented decks painted in the mid 15th century for the Visconti-Sforza family, the rulers of Milan.

## Early decks

Picture-card packs are first mentioned by Martiano da Tortona probably between 1418 and 1425, since the painter he mentions, Michelino da Besozzo, returned to Milan in 1418, while Martiano himself died in 1425. He describes a deck with 16 picture cards with images of the Greek gods and suits depicting four kinds of birds, not the common suits. However the 16 cards were obviously regarded as "trumps" as, about 25 years later, Jacopo Antonio Marcello called them a *ludus triumphorum*, or "game of trumps".

Special motifs on cards added to regular packs show philosophical, social, poetical, astronomical, and heraldic ideas, Roman/Greek/Babylonian heroes, as in the case of the Sola-Busca-Tarocchi (1491) and the Boiardo Tarocchi poem, written at an unknown date between 1461 and 1494.<sup>[8]</sup>

Two playing card decks from Milan (the Brera-Brambilla and Cary-Yale-Tarocchi)—extant, but fragmentary—were made circa 1440. Three documents dating from 1 January 1441 to July 1442, use the term *trionfi*. The document from January 1441 is regarded as an unreliable reference; however, the same painter, Sagramoro, was commissioned by the same patron, Leonello d'Este, as in the February 1442 document. The game seemed to gain in importance in the year 1450, a Jubilee year in Italy, which saw many festivities and the movement of many pilgrims.

Three mid-15th century sets were made for members of the Visconti family. The first deck, and probably the prototype, is called the Cary-Yale Tarot (or Visconti-Modrone Tarot) and was created between 1442 and 1447 by an anonymous painter for Filippo Maria Visconti. The cards (only 67) are today in the Cary collection of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, in the U.S. state of Connecticut.<sup>[9]</sup> The most famous was painted in the mid-15th century, to celebrate Francesco Sforza and his wife Bianca Maria Visconti, daughter of the duke Filippo Maria. Probably, these cards were painted by Bonifacio Bembo or Francesco Zavattari between 1451 and 1453. Of the original cards, 35 are in The Morgan Library & Museum, 26 are at the Accademia Carrara, thirteen are at the Casa Colleoni, and four: The Devil, The Tower, Money's Horse (The Chariot), and the 3 of Spades, are lost or were never made. This "Visconti-Sforza" deck, which has been widely reproduced, reflects conventional iconography of the time to a significant degree.

Hand-painted tarot cards remained a privilege of the upper classes and, although a single sermon by a Dominican preacher inveighing against the evil inherent in cards (mostly centered around their use in gambling) can be traced to the 14th century,<sup>[10]</sup> no routine condemnations of tarot were found during its early history.



*Le Bateleur: The Juggler* from the Tarot of Marseilles. This card is often named *The Magician* in modern English language tarots

Because the earliest tarot cards were hand-painted, the number of the decks produced is thought to have been rather small, and it was only after the invention of the printing press that mass production of cards became possible. Decks survive from this era from various cities in France, and the most popular pattern of these early printed decks comes from the southern city of Marseilles, after which it is named the Tarot de Marseilles.

## Tarot, tarock and tarocchi games

The original purpose of tarot cards was for playing games, the first basic rules appearing in the manuscript of Martino da Tortona before 1425, and the next from the year 1637. The game of tarot has many cultural variations. In Italy the game has become less popular. One version named Tarocco Bolognese: Otocento has survived and there are still others played in Piedmont; but the number of games outside of Italy is much higher. The French tarot game is the most popular in its native country and regional tarot games—often known as *tarock*, *tarok*, or *tarokk*—are widely played in central Europe.

## Divinatory, esoteric, and occult tarot

Each card possesses a pictogram and title that represents a specific concept. The belief of divinity associated with Tarot focuses on the prospect that whatever cards are dealt to the participant will be revelatory.

Divination using playing cards is in evidence as early as 1540 in a book entitled *The Oracles of Francesco Marcolino da Forlì* which allows a simple method of divination, though the cards are used only to select a random oracle and have no meaning in themselves. But manuscripts from 1735 (*The Square of Sevens*) and 1750 (*Pratesi Cartomancer*) document rudimentary divinatory meanings for the cards of the tarot as well as a system for laying out the cards. Giacomo Casanova wrote in his diary that in 1765 his Russian mistress frequently used a deck of playing cards for divination.

Tarot cards would later become associated with mysticism and magic.<sup>[11]</sup> Tarot was not widely adopted by mystics, occultists and secret societies until the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> The tradition began in 1781, when Antoine Court de Gébelin, a Swiss clergyman, published *Le Monde Primitif*, a speculative study which included religious symbolism and its survival in the modern world. De Gébelin first asserted that symbolism of the *Tarot de Marseille* represented the mysteries of Isis and Thoth. Gébelin further claimed that the name "tarot" came from the Egyptian words *tar*, meaning "royal", and *ro*, meaning "road", and that the Tarot therefore represented a "royal road" to wisdom. De Gébelin wrote this treatise before Jean-François Champollion had deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphs, or indeed before the Rosetta Stone had been discovered, and later Egyptologists found nothing in the Egyptian language to support de Gébelin's fanciful etymologies. Despite this, the identification of the tarot cards with the Egyptian Book of Thoth was already firmly established in occult practice and continues in to the present day.



## Non-occult Italian-suited tarot decks



Tarocco Piemontese: the Fool.

These were the oldest form of tarot deck to be made, being first devised in the 15th century in northern Italy. The occult tarot decks are based on decks of this type. Four decks of this category are still used to play certain games:

- The **Tarocco Piemontese** consists of the four suits of swords, batons, cups and coins, each headed by a king, queen, cavalier and jack, followed by numerals 10 down to 1. The trumps rank as follows: The Angel (20—although it only bears the second-highest number, it is nonetheless the highest), the World (21), the Sun (19), the Moon (18), the Star (17), the Tower (16), the Devil (15), Temperance (14), Death (13), the Hanged Man (12), Justice (11), the Wheel of Fortune (10), the Hermit (9), Strength (8), the Chariot (7), the Lovers (6), the Pope (5), the Emperor (4), the Empress (3), the Popess (2) and the Bagatto (1). There is also the Fool (*Matto*).
- The **Tarot de Besançon** and the **Swiss Tarot 1JJ** are similar, but are of a different graphical design, and replaces the Pope with Jupiter, the Popess with Juno, and the Angel with the Judgement. The trumps rank in numerical order and the Tower is known as the House of God.
- The **Tarocco Bolognese** omits numeral cards two to five in plain suits, leaving it with 62 cards, and has somewhat different trumps, not all of which are numbered and four of which are equal in rank. It has a different graphical design.
- The **Tarocco Siciliano** changes some of the trumps, and replaces the 21 with a card labeled *Miseria* (destitution). It omits the Two and Three of coins, and numerals one to four in batons, swords and cups: it thus has 64 cards. The cards are quite small and, again, of a different graphical design.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Occult tarot decks

Etteilla was the first to issue a revised tarot deck specifically designed for occult purposes rather than game playing. In keeping with the belief that tarot cards are derived from the Book of Thoth, Etteilla's tarot contained themes related to ancient Egypt. The 78-card tarot deck used by esotericists has two distinct parts:

- The **Major Arcana** (greater secrets), or trump cards, consists of 22 cards without suits: The Magician, The High Priestess, The Empress, The Emperor, The Hierophant, The Lovers, The Chariot, Strength, The Hermit, Wheel of Fortune, Justice, The Hanged Man, Death, Temperance, The Devil, The Tower, The Star, The Moon, The Sun, Judgement, The World and The Fool.
- The **Minor Arcana** (lesser secrets) consists of 56 cards, divided into four suits of 14 cards each; ten numbered cards and four court cards. The court cards are the King, Queen, Knight and Page/Jack, in each of the four tarot suits. The traditional Italian tarot suits are swords, batons/wands, coins and cups; in modern tarot decks, however, the batons suit is often called wands, rods or staves, while the coins suit is often called pentacles or disks.

The terms "major arcana" and "minor arcana" were first used by Jean Baptiste Pitois (also known as Paul Christian) and are never used in relation to Tarot card games.

Tarot is often used in conjunction with the study of the Hermetic Qabalah.<sup>[12]</sup> In these decks all the cards are illustrated in accordance with Kabbalistic principles, most being under the influence of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck and bearing illustrated scenes on all the suit cards. The images on the "Rider-Waite" deck were drawn by artist Pamela Colman Smith, to the instructions of mystic and occultist Arthur Edward Waite, and were originally published by the Rider Company in 1910. This deck is considered a simple, user friendly one but nevertheless its imagery, especially in the Major Arcana, is complex and replete with esoteric symbolism. The subjects of the Major Arcana are based on those of the earliest decks, but have been significantly modified to reflect Waite and Smith's

view of tarot. An important difference from Marseilles style decks is that Smith drew scenes with esoteric meanings on the suit cards. However the Rider-Waite wasn't the first deck to include completely illustrated suit cards. The first to do so was the 15th century Sola-Busca deck.<sup>[13]</sup>

Older decks such as the Visconti-Sforza and Marseilles are less detailed than modern esoteric decks. A Marseilles type deck is usually distinguished by having repetitive motifs on the pip cards, similar to Italian or Spanish playing cards, as opposed to the full scenes found on "Rider-Waite" style decks. These more simply illustrated "Marseilles" style decks are also used esoterically, for divination, and for game play, though the French card game of tarot is now generally played using a relatively modern 19th century design of German origin. Such playing tarot decks generally have twenty one trump cards with genre scenes from 19th century life, a Fool, and have court and pip cards that closely resemble today's French playing cards.

The Marseilles style tarot decks generally feature numbered minor arcana cards that look very much like the pip cards of modern playing card decks. The Marseilles' numbered minor arcana cards do not have scenes depicted on them; rather, they sport a geometric arrangement of the number of suit symbols (e.g., swords, rods/wands, cups, coins/pentacles) corresponding to the number of the card (accompanied by botanical and other non-scenic flourishes), while the court cards are often illustrated with flat, two-dimensional drawings.

A widely used modernist esoteric tarot deck is Aleister Crowley's Thoth Tarot (*Thoth* pronounced /'toʊt/ or /'θoθ/). Crowley, at the height of a lifetime's work dedicated to occultism, engaged the artist Lady Frieda Harris to paint the cards for the deck according to his specifications. His system of tarot correspondences, published in *The Book of Thoth* and *Liber 777*, are an evolution and expansion upon that which he learned in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>[14]</sup>

In contrast to the Thoth deck's colorfulness, the illustrations on Paul Foster Case's B.O.T.A. Tarot deck are black line drawings on white cards; this is an unlaminated deck intended to be colored by its owner.

Other esoteric decks include the Golden Dawn Tarot, which claims to be based on a deck by S.L. MacGregor Mathers.

The variety of decks presently available is almost endless, and grows yearly. For instance, cat-lovers may have the Tarot of the Cat People, a deck replete with cats in every picture. The Tarot of the Witches and the Aquarian Tarot retain the conventional cards with varying designs. The Tree of Life Tarot's cards are stark symbolic catalogs; and the Alchemical Tarot combines traditional alchemical symbols with tarot images.

These contemporary divination decks change the cards to varying degrees. For example, the Motherpeace Tarot is notable for its circular cards and feminist angle: the male characters have been replaced by females. The Tarot of Baseball has suits of bats, mitts, balls and bases; "coaches" and "MVPs" instead of Queens and Kings; and major arcana cards like "The Catcher", "The Rule Book" and "Batting a Thousand". In the Silicon Valley Tarot, major arcana cards include The Hacker, Flame War, The Layoff and The Garage; the suits are Networks, Cubicles, Disks and Hosts; the court cards CEO, Salesman, Marketeer and New Hire. Another tarot in recent years has been the Robin Wood Tarot. This deck retains the Rider-Waite theme while adding some very soft and colorful Pagan symbolism. As with other decks, the cards are available with a companion book written by Wood which details all of the symbolism and colors utilized in the Major and Minor Arcana.

Unconventionality is taken to an extreme by Morgan's Tarot, produced in 1970 by Morgan Robbins and illustrated by Darshan Chorpash Zenith. Morgan's Tarot has no suits, no card ranking and no explicit order of the cards. It has 88 cards rather than the more conventional 78, and its simple line drawings show a strong influence from the psychedelic era. Nevertheless, in the introductory booklet that accompanies the deck Robbins claims spiritual inspiration for the cards and cites the influence of Tibetan Buddhism in particular.

### **Deck-specific symbolism**

Many popular decks have modified the traditional symbolism to reflect the esoteric beliefs of their creators.

### **Rider-Waite-Smith deck**

The tarot created by A.E. Waite and Pamela Coleman Smith departs from the earlier tarot design with its use of scenic pip cards and the alteration of how the Strength and Justice cards are ranked.

### **Crowley-Harris Thoth deck**

Each card in the Thoth deck is intricately detailed with astrological, zodiacal, elemental and Qabalistic symbols related to each card. Colours are used symbolically, especially the cards related to the five elements of Spirit, Fire, Water, Air and Earth. Crowley wrote a book--The Book of Thoth to accompany, describe, and expand on his deck and the data regarding the pathways within. Unlike the popular Waite-Smith Tarot, the Thoth Tarot retains the traditional order of the trumps but uses alternative nomenclature for both the trumps and the courts.

### **Hermetic Tarot**

Hermetic Tarot utilizes the tarot imagery to function as a textbook and mnemonic device for teaching and revealing the gnosis of alchemical symbolical language and its profound and philosophical meanings. An example of this practice is found in the rituals of the 19th Century Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In the 20th Century Hermetic use of the tarot imagery as a handbook and revealer of perennial wisdom was further developed in the work of Carl Gustav Jung and his exploration into the psyche and active imagination. A 21st century example of a Hermetic rooted tarot deck is that of Tarot ReVisioned, a black and white deck and book for the Major Arcana by Leigh J. McCloskey.<sup>[15]</sup>

### **Popular culture Tarot decks**

The Vertigo Tarot deck employs characters from titles of American publisher Vertigo Comics including such imagery as John Constantine from *Hellblazer*, in the role of The Fool zero card. The cards were illustrated by Dave McKean with text by Rachel Pollack and the accompanying book holds an introduction by Neil Gaiman.

Artist Tiffany Lee Brown created the Burning Tarot deck using photographs of the annual Burning Man festival in Black Rock City, Nevada. She produced a miniature card deck in 2003 showing a modified Major Arcana. In 2008 and 2009, Brown collaborated with photographer Steven Fritz and costumed participants of the festival to make a double-sided Tarot deck. Burning Tarot is available online free of charge.<sup>[16][17]</sup> The deck also provided the basis for a two-room art installation and performance at the 2009 Manor of Art show in Portland, Oregon.<sup>[18]</sup>

Hello Tarot, an out-of-print deck based on the Rider-Waite Tarot, features drawings of Japanese pop culture phenomenon Hello Kitty and her cartoon friends as rendered by artist Joe Rosales. The Peanuts Arcana uses characters from the Charles M. Schulz cartoon Peanuts.<sup>[19][20]</sup>

People who pre-ordered the video game Dishonored received a Tarot deck in the package; however, the pack's Major and Minor Arcana differ from a "true" Tarot deck: the Major Arcana having names changed and Death at the 21st place; the Minor Arcana cards have no suits correlating to Coins, Cups, or Wands.

The fantasy series known best as the Amber Chronicles features a set of magical tarots, referred to in-universe as "trumps", which can be used to transport the user to the figure drawn in the trump, or for communication.

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## External links

- Tarotpedia ([http://www.tarotpedia.com/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://www.tarotpedia.com/wiki/Main_Page))

## Further reading

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