

A Century with the Waite-Smith Tarot (and all the others...)

When the French author, priest and Freemason Antoine Court de Gebelin (1719-84) in 1781 advanced the allegation, that the tarot deck constituted the Egyptian god Thoth's 'Secret Book', he cast a seed to something, which during the next couple of centuries should grow to immense heights. Tarot was an ordinary card game in many parts of France, but not in Paris, where Gebelin lived. One day, when he noticed a group of tarot players, he intuitively grasped the idea, that he had here discovered something far more than an utterly simple deck of playing cards.

Gebelin put forward his discovery in volume eight of his nine volume work *'Le Monde Primitif analysé et comparé avec le Monde moderne'*. The deck of cards used by the players that Gebelin watched, was presumably the Marseilles standard pattern. Playing card terminology defines a 'standard pattern' as a set of images, with none or only minor differences, produced by many different card makers in various localities'. The Marseilles pattern fits very well into this definition. It was produced by many card makers, not only in France but also in Italy. By and by a number of local varieties developed, like the Tarot Bolognese, the Sicilian Tarot, the Tarot Piemonte and Tarot Milanese. Distinct variations saw the light of day in France, Belgium, Switzerland. All with their own characteristics but all with the Marseille pattern as a distinct background.



Jeu de Tarot Egyptiens (Etteilla) ca. 1880 by Z. Lismon



Gebelin's seed was slow in germinating, development took its time. The first, who took up the concept, was the Parisian fortune-teller Etteilla. Inspired by Gebelin, he saw the tarot cards as a sort of expanded fortune-telling cards, which he, however, did not find completely satisfying. So he started 'improving' them by adding interpretative texts, visual symbols and small vignettes, as we know them from ordinary fortune-telling cards. He also published books with practical instructions on how his 'tarot decks' could be used. Etteilla's 'tarots' have in general been considered reprehensible but, maybe, time is now ready for a further study of their symbolism.

With Etteilla's intervention, the seed from the big tree in the wood, the Marseille pattern, had finally began to sprout and from now on it grew quickly. We now come to the French esoterist, Alphonse Louis Constant, writing from about 1850 under the name of Eliphás Levi. Levi rejected Etteilla's 'improvements and 'corrections' and returned to the Marseilles tarot in its pure form. Levi's books, which described quite a number of esoteric systems, like kabbala, alchemy, astrology and tarot, started a wave in the world of esotericism. At this time a tarot deck, which rightly can be called the very first created for a solely esoteric purpose, saw the light of the day. Swiss Oswald Wirth (1860-1943), a competent artist, student and secretary of another of the occult characters of the time, Marquis Stanislas de Guaita, was by him encouraged to create a tarot deck, cleaned of Etteilla's 'im-



Oswald Wirth Tarot 1889

provements'. Wirth's tarot, with relatively simple stencil coloured images, was for the first time produced in 1889. The cards, still with the Marseille pattern as a basis, had the Hebrew letters, essentially for the tarot correspondences with the Kabbala and the Tree of Life. Here I feel it necessary to add the remark, that the deck currently marketed as *'the original and only authorised Oswald Wirth Tarot deck'*, has nothing what so ever to do with Wirth's tarot. The images are not Wirth's original (but drawn by a Michel Simeon) and Wirth's deck did not comprise a minor arcana, which was not a part of his scheme of things. The ways of tarot publishers are past understanding.

Gebelin's seed had found its ground. Tarot moved from France to England in the second half of the 19th. Century and dumped right into the Victorian era, where occult- and esoteric lodges flourished. In particular Tarot found a home in *'The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn'*, established in 1888. The basis for Golden Dawn's order work was, in particular, the writings of the French esoterics as they were expressed in Levi's books. The order papers, which were granted to the adepts as they raised in the order grades included, at the time the adept was admitted to The Second Order, instructions which would make it possible for him or her to create their own tarot deck. At a time a prototype, drawn by Moina Mathers (married to Samuel Liddell Mathers, one of the GD's founders), was available for copying. Tarot as a card game was not known in Great Britain and even to get a Marseilles deck was near to impossible.

In this environment, a big and vigorous tree grew out of Gebelin's seeds: the Waite-Smith Tarot, created by the man of letters, Arthur Edward Waite and the artist Pamela Colman Smith, both members of the Golden Dawn. Right now in December 2009 we can celebrate the Waite-Smith Tarot's 100 years anniversary. How many other tarot decks will ever come to celebrate a 100 years anniversary? None, in my opinion. The time was the early 20th Century, during which tarot, unpredictably, should come to grow to immense heights.

For the members of the secret societies and lodges, for the magicians, who strived for controlling the forces of the universe and for the kabbalists, who wanted to explore the scheme of things to understand the creation and man's place in the universe through the Tree of Life' spheres and paths, tarot was the tool par excellence. For many decades the Marseille pattern tarot had been that tool. The tarot deck's 'divinatory' aspects, those of *'seeking the advice of the Devine through a mantic method like casting of lots, dice, runes, tarot..'* were considered inferior, that was not what tarot essentially was for. Now a new and different tarot was available, a tarot which also changed the concept of tarot over the next century, more or less away from that of being a tool of recognition to



Waite-Smith Tarot 1909

that of being a tool for an upcoming craze of 'card-reading'. While the number cards in the Marseille patterned decks depicted only the relevant number of the suit symbols: wands, cups, swords and coins (fine enough for the Kabbalists and numerologists), the Waite-Smith tarot depicted four series of action pictures, with people engaged in various activities. There were other differences from the Marseilles tarot, but not so obvious at a first glance. Waite's had, however, changed the sequence of the majors, compared to the Marseilles deck sequence. Waite was not only a man of letters, he was also a man of secrecy and this was his secret which he did not want to reveal. Essentially it was all about making a more relevant correspondence with the astrological signs which each major arcana card related to. These correspondences were considered being secrets available only to Golden Dawn adepts (secret societies need to have some secrets to guard), and Waite was afraid that he, if he published any



Thompson-Leng 1935

details in the book accompanying the deck: *'The Key of the Tarot, being Fragments of a Secret Tradition under the Veil of divination'*, he would have broken his oath to the Golden Dawn. For the same reason of secrecy, he did not include Hebrew letters in the card design, as Wirth had done it.

The Tarot Forest's underwood continued to grow steadily but slowly over many decades. Pamela Colman Smith's drawings were unrestrained copied and redrawn. Waite's book was soon copied and sold under the name of an American 'author'. The Tarot Forest had, by and by, got a low undergrowth of tarot decks, more or less based upon the Waite-Smith Tarot. The next seedling to become a powerful trunk in the Forest of Tarot was Crowley/Harris' 'Thoth Tarot,' which came alive in 1944 after five years cooperation

between the esoterist, magician, provocateur, eroticist and drug-addict Aleister Crowley and the artist and upper-class housewife, Lady Frieda Harris. Tarot was still for the few.

With the Waite-Smith tarot the world had got a comic book in loose leaf format and an endless combination of comic strips could be created and read as a story by mixing the 78 card and placing them in one of many patterns. The flower power era, named by the American poet Allen Ginsburg, that erupted in the American counterculture during the late 1960s and early 1970s stimulated this new way of looking at the tarot and several packs showed up, published by alternative publishers. In the early 1970's it, however, went wrong. Greedy capital interests took over the Tarot Forest, like they took over the South American rainforests. Tarot was turned into an industry, a massmedia that could be compared with the continual flow of comic books. Every week its comic book, every week its tarot deck and each 'tarot-reader' felt that she too had to create her own tarot deck. We had come far away from the tarot of the Golden Dawn adepts. All sorts of tarot decks appeared, all subjects, which had no whatsoever with tarot to do: Norse mythology, Red Indian lore, the Vikings, the Celts, the Saints, the Mayans, the Angles, the Gay, the Witches - the list is long - , were forced into a tarot structure of 78 cards. Most of them with voluminous books that tried to explain why exactly this subject reflects the tarot. Many privately published and personal decks appeared too, which was fine for the persons, who created them and their own circles, but essentially of no common importance. In my own collection I have about 1400 tarot deck up to the year 2000 (divinatory and fortune telling packs not included), a huge industry of tarot. Only occasional seedlings gained foothold in the tarot underwood, particularly those



Artistamps by Lyn Howarth-Olds, New Zealand

drawn by artists with a capital 'A' like Pamela Colman Smith and Frieda Harris. The major part of the underwood flourished only for a short time to perish soon, which also is the main purpose of capital interests: to create a continuous turnover.

Rider Waite Tarot, *Rider Waite-Smith Tarot* and latest *Smith-Waite Tarot (!)*, we have many names for the things we love, but that doesn't necessarily make a name appropriate. These three names are all constructions attributed to the deck by US-Games Systems Inc, who took over the publication in the early 1970's. The original publisher, William Rider did never connect his own name to the tarot, and why should he. It was simply named 'Tarot Cards' in advertising; no other tarot decks were available in England at that time. Rightly it should be named the *Waite-Smith Tarot*, as a tribute to its two creators. Publishers are publishers, they are in it for the money and need not be given a credit for that. A good and easy way to honour the two creators right now, where the deck's 100 years existence can be celebrated would be from now persistently to call the deck *Waite-Smith Tarot*. For reasons I am not aware of, several of the best known American tarotists continue to include 'Rider' in its name. It is certainly not to honour William Rider, the publisher, but rather the person, who named it 'Rider-Waite'



Asta Erte's Waite-Smith Tarot Mail Art Project
A selection of transformed covers.

years later.

Lately, voices have advocated for, that Pamela Colman Smith is the 'real' creator of the Waite-Smith tarot. My own book 'The Story of the Waite-Smith Tarot' has also been used as an argument for that. Sorry, but no (and this is not to minimize PCS's work, on the contrary), but without Waite, there would not have been a tarot deck illustrated by Pamela Colman Smith, while there very well could have been a Waite tarot illustrated by another artist. Quite a different deck, of course, but still based upon Waite's concept.

This is the anniversary year, which we certainly shall celebrate. A lot has lately been written about the Waite-Smith Tarot and tarot conventions reserved time for WST-related talks. USGames Systems Inc. did it their own way by publishing a package called '*The Pamela Colman Smith Commemorative Set*'. Not much honour for Waite here, since the package only included a twisted version of A.E.Waite's 'The Pictorial Key to the Tarot', twisted in the way that the pictures' were simply cut away. The pack includes also a tarot deck (this is where the name 'Smith-Waite Tarot' comes in) which is a likely twisted 'reproduction' of the first published Waite-Smith Tarot, the one with the roses and lilies backpattern. In this case the reproduction work is muddy and the original back pattern is substituted by a stylised monogram. The only gem in the package is a small book depicting colour reproductions of other works by Pamela Colman Smith.

For my own part, I have initiated a mail art project by mailing 22 small books, illustrating in b&w all 78 WST-cards, to tarot artists and mail artist around in the world, asking them to transform the book in whatever way they want.

In a few years, the copyright to Pamela Colman Smith's artwork for the Waite-Smith Tarot comes to an absolute end, regardless of what attempts are made to hide that fact. Maybe then a tarot publisher will at last present the tarot world for the true facsimile of the original pack, which has long been wanted.

Back in 1995 when I 'discovered' that two early Waite-Smith tarot decks, I happened to have in my collection, actually were quite different when looked on at close hand, no one had cared for

details like that before, even though questions like “*How were the original colours*” had been asked. My book “*The Story of the Waite-Smith Tarot*” was published in 2006. When I should find a name for it, I considered calling it “*The True Story of the Waite-Smith Tarot*” but gave up the idea again. There were too many gaps that still could not be filled in. Meanwhile the interest for the deck has grown and the few copies of the early decks that come up for sale fetch extraordinary high prices. The research goes on and the most remarkable late discovery is that of Piero Alligo, one of the two owners of Lo Scarabeo who, supported by careful analyses of the printing technique used, has found a likely *printing* sequence in contrast to the *publication* sequence I present in my book. By accepting the existence of both sequences several questions are answered, questions like “why was the deck redrawn several times”, “why are early editions accompanied by a later dated “Key” and “what does that strange line on the Sun-card mean”. The biggest question of them all has, however, never been answered: ‘What happened to Pamela Colman Smith’s original artwork?’”

We are now at the end of the Waite-Smith anniversary year. Are we also getting nearer to the end of the tarot era? Have we reached a boundary, where enough is enough and where the tarot market is becoming satisfied? Where we have to realize that the many, who became familiar with tarot during the last four decades of the 20th Century have grown older, and that young people of today have other interests to occupy themselves with. Additionally, we are in a current economical crisis and it looks like there signs of that the tarot factories have slowed down the production.

Three big tree trunks reach still high and solid and robust up over the Tarot Forest’s crumbled and withered underwood: the progenitor, the Marseille-tarot, followed by the Waite-Smith Tarot and the Crowley-Harris Thoth Tarot. They are here to

stay and what more does a serious tarot student actually need?

One can ponder about what tarot would be today, had not Court de Gebelin back in 1781 caught the confused idea, that an ordinary playing-card deck was an Egyptian god’s secret book. Tarot would, undoubtedly, still be a cardgame but would it be more than that? I doubt. Maybe the time is now to place flowers on the gravestone of the so far rather



discredited Antoine Court de Gebelin.

K.Frank Jensen, November 2009

notes:

K. Frank Jensen: *The Story of the Waite-Smith Tarot*. Association of Tarot Studies, Melbourne 2006 (available from this site).

See also my web-site: www.manteia-online.dk for new details on the Waite-Smith Tarot. Here you can also find my review of ‘*Twenty Years of Tarot: The Lo Scarabeo Story*’ including my comments to Piero Alligo’s article on the printing sequence of the early Waite-Smith Tarot decks.

Documentation of ‘*Asta Erte’s Waite-Smith Tarot Mail Art Project*’ can be found at the same web-site from late December 2009.

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