

...Veiled in Allegory and Illustrated by Symbols

Tarot -1598, from Fr. tarot (16c.), from O.It. tarocchi (pl.), of unknown origin, perhaps from Arabic taraha "reject." The deck first used in Italy 14c., as playing cards as well as for fortune-telling. The tarots, strictly speaking, are the 22 figured cards added to the 56-card suits pack.

We have all at one time or another heard of or have seen Tarot cards. Many people, however, are not aware of the origin, use, nor the relation to Freemasonry. The intent of this paper is to examine such topics.

The history of the tarot is like most things from antiquity, uncertain at best and more realistically simply indiscernible. There are, however, some likely and accepted clues to the origin. Card decks similar to those of the Tarot de Marseille, which we will examine shortly, are thought to have been found in the Far East, more specifically, China. Yet there is not a clear path that would solidify this idea. It is speculated that the symbols and ideas contained in the earlier French decks could also have an origin from India or more likely Persia. As most ancient philosophical schools passed from the East through Persia, eventually ending in Europe as pilgrims returned with the new found knowledge, this seems the most plausible path of origin.

There is some who feel that the origins of Tarot maybe closer to the European Continent in Italy. Some speculate the origin of the word Tarot is actually Italian. "It is most likely that the word used to describe the cards has Italian origins. The Italian word for cards is 'Tarocchi' which comes from the Valley of Taro River north of Italy. This is where some believe the cards originated in the 15th century." This still leaves a gap of centuries for the cards or their teachings to have reached the Continent and again would lead one to assume the origins as proposed above.



Figure 1 - Le Fol, Tarot de Marseille

The Tarot de Marseille is assumed to be the known historical point for many of the modern decks in use today. It's "genealogy" possibly being from Northern Italy, having

migrated to Southern France sometime during or prior to the 15th Century. Its exoteric use during this period was simply a card game, often still played today in many French speaking countriesⁱⁱ. Many feel that this was simply a method to keep the power of the Church from deeming the cards as sinful and outlawing their use. It should be noted that at this time other card games of chance were outlawed, but it is assumed that the tarot's favor among the higher echelons of society as a game of chance which ensured its continued acceptance.

The most widely known and utilized deck in use today, is the Rider-Waite tarot. It was the opus of one of our brethren, Arthur Edward Waite or as he is more commonly known A.E. Waite. He is considered to be one of the premier contemporary occultists, having first joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Freemasonry, Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, and finally establishing the Brotherhood of the Rosy Crossⁱⁱⁱ. He was also a scholar of Kabbalah and Alchemy, but it is his Tarot that he is best known for. An interesting footnote to the Rider-Waite deck comes from the name itself; Waite produced the deck with the assistance of an artist by the name of Pamela Colman Smith, a fellow of the Golden Dawn, but Waite gave the honor of the first name to his publisher, the William Rider & Sons of London Co. The deck's first publishing took place in late 1909, December to be exact. The following year a small compendium was provided with the deck as a guide for the purchaser. Many have copied Waite's deck, adding and subtracting from as best to suit their particular mystic school, e.g. Hermetic Tarot, Masonic Tarot, etc.

It would be difficult to proceed any further, without some explanation to the structure of the tarot deck in a generic term. It should be apparent to the reader that there are numerous interpretations of tarot with a seemingly endless form, to include some of those highlighted in the preceding paragraph. The majority of the decks are divided into two parts, the Major and Minor Arcana (note, arcane is the plural of Arcanum, the definition of which I prefer is *Specialized knowledge or detail that is mysterious to the average person*). The Major Arcana are the twenty-two typical trumps found in both esoteric and exoteric cards. In the Rider-Waite deck and most others, are non-repeating scenes with depictions of deeply symbolic images contained within. Figure 2 below is one such example.



Figure 2 - The Fool

The full Major Arcana trumps are the

0	The Fool	11	Justice
1	The Magician	12	The Hanged Man
2	The High Priestess	13	Death
3	The Empress	14	Temperance
4	The Emperor	15	The Devil
5	The Hierophant	16	The Tower
6	The Lovers	17	The Star
7	The Chariot	18	The Moon
8	Strength	19	The Sun
9	The Hermit	20	Judgement
10	The Wheel of Fortune	21	The World ^{iv}

The Minor Arcana are the fifty suits of the tarot. They are commonly made up of groupings known as wands, cups, swords, and pentacles. These are the forms of the deck which have come into common use in our everyday deck of cards we are all familiar with; there has been a small evolution to achieve the suits found today. The previously alluded to suits are actually found in early tarocchi from Italy and today's esoteric series, however, the French tarot in use today for the common card game are identical to the spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs that we use. These suits are numbered one through ten, the Ace being one, numbered cards through ten and then the addition of pages, knights, queens, and kings which are used in the same manner as face cards in a standard deck.

The esoteric nature of the Major Arcana contains the most profound aspects and true focus of this paper. It is worth examining these archetypal cards in more depth, although there is no true interpretation of each card, but accepted understandings, as is the case with many of our Masonic Symbols. At best we can only speculate here, but that is the nature of our craft and pursuit as Masons. Given the depth of insight and teachings contained in each of these cards, enough to warrant a dissertation or even a book in actuality, I will attempt to highlight some of the finer points. The primary influences on tarot are the teachings of both Alchemy and Kabbalah, although as has been mentioned Hermeticism and Egyptian mystic philosophies are found within the imagery of the decks. It is these archetypes that I speak of that seem to resonate with each person who spends any time with the tarot deck. The names of the cards themselves allude to an archetypal character that evokes some shared viewpoint of all; the fool, the magician, and the hermit, are but a few characters we have all encountered in life or our studies. To the some, the Fool is emblematical of innocence, youth, and even ignorance, but not in a maleficent implication. He is the epitome of the inquisitiveness contained within each of us, but is most obvious in youth. His innocence for life yet discovered is seen through his expression and fearlessness he shows standing upon the cliff before him.

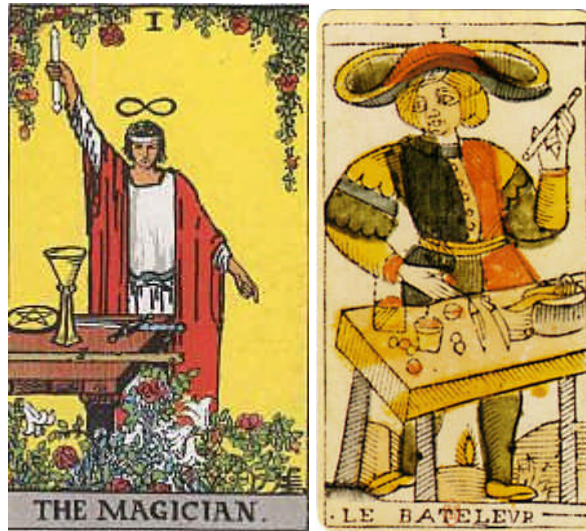


Figure 3 - The Magician

The Magician (figure 3) is thought of as a scholar, unity, and action. His symbols are varied, but the most prominent on all decks is that of the infinity character. In the Marseille deck, this symbol is said to be made up of the shape of his hat and in the Rider-Waite it is an exoteric application with the symbol placed above the magicians head. He alludes to the Hermetic maxim of “as above, so below” through his gesture and implies kinetic energy as opposed to potentiality. The contents of his table are thought of to be representations to the elements, earth, air, fire, and water.

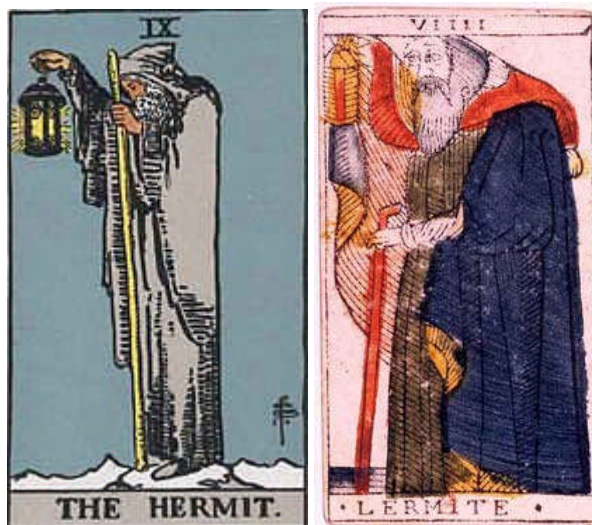


Figure 4 - The Hermit

The Hermit will strike a figure common in some of the rituals of our craft, but we will touch on that later. The common figure of a hermit can be found throughout literary history,

whether it be as the wise figure hidden away from the local establishment or the wise old man of classical tales, this is someone we are all familiar with. He is representative of our inner search for our true selves which we alone can seek, isolation, prudence, and even guidance symbolized via the lantern. His staff is his strength, with a total allusion to the turn of the phase “seek and ye shall find”.

These are just three of the archetypes contained in the Major Arcana, but the reader at this point should be compelled to take up a study of the tarot to infer their own meanings and speculations to the symbols so beautifully illustrated.

This is not the end of this examination, as was proposed at the outset; we seek to find the commonality between the tarot and Freemasonry, beyond the obvious that both are tools utilizing symbols to deliver archetypal characters to the novitiate. The most obvious connection between the two can be seen in the high priestess that has an allusion that should be familiar to those of the appropriate degree (figure 5).^v The role of duality is also prevalent in this image and in our degrees, the black and white of the pillars, light and darkness in our craft. The pomegranates have another significance that is known to be found in numerous places throughout the Rider-Waite deck and again in Masonry. There are notes given to man’s growth from childhood to adulthood and finally old age, via the fool and culminating with the Emperor card or even the Hermit. This theme is also prevalent in the various degrees, orders, and grades of both Blue Lodge and the appendant bodies.



Figure 5 - The High Priestess

The Sun and the Moon are also predominantly featured in the Tarot. Their role in Masonry is just as predominantly displayed, from the deacons’ rods, to allusions in the degrees, and so forth. The World has a connection with one of Master Masons lessons in the degrees, although it would not be prudent to go into an in depth comparison or explanation, it is safe to say that the exact images are used in both (figure 6).



Figure 6 - The World

This is a small sample of the overlap in both esoteric teachings, yet this should not be of a surprise given the roots of both are speculated to have the same origins. One would ask if these similarities are of pure intention or mere coincidence. Others have suggested that we may never now, as Brother Waite was a member of many esoteric schools and his inspiration may have come from those organizations just as readily as they could be of Masonic origin. I invite you to draw your own conclusions and the next time you sit in lodge recall the tarot, its symbols, their speculative intent, and its place within our own order. I would suggest reading Brother Waite's own treatise on Tarot, as well as Manly Hall's examination of the deck.

I leave you with some words from our own Brother Waite:

“The Tarot embodies symbolical presentations of universal ideas, behind which lie all the implicits of the human mind, and it is in this sense that they contain secret doctrine, which is the realization by the few of truths embedded in the consciousness of all.”

The Key to the Tarot, part II (1910)

ⁱ <http://www.paranormal-encyclopedia.com/t/tarot/history/> . The History of Tarot Cards.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pagat.com/tarot/frtarot.html>. French Tarot.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/biography/esoterica/waite_a/waite_a.html . Arthur Edward Waite

^{iv} <http://www.wyrdology.com/scrying/tarot/major-arcana.html>. Tarot Trump Cards

^v http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/major_arcana_tarot.html. Masonic Allusion and Symbolism in the Figures and Interpretations of the Major Arcana of the Tarot by A.E. Waite.