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Women Tarot Artists Inspired by the Golden Dawn: Recent Publications

Abstract

The Tarot art of Leonora Carrington and Ithell Colquhoun is discussed in the context of other women artists influenced by the Golden Dawn and who created historical Tarot decks. The emphasis is on the recent publications about Carrington and Colquhoun from Fulgur Press, with references to recent books about the Tarot art of Moina Mathers, Pamela Colman Smith, Jessie Burns Park, and Frieda Harris.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; Women Tarot Artists Inspired by the Golden Dawn: Recent Publications; Review Essay; Emily E. Auger; Carrington; Colquhoun; Golden Dawn; Pamela Colman Smith; Surrealism; Golden Dawn; Moina Mathers; Frieda Harris; Jessie Burns Park



REVIEW ESSAY

WOMEN TAROT ARTISTS INSPIRED BY THE GOLDEN DAWN: RECENT PUBLICATIONS¹

EMILY E. AUGER

THE TAROT OF LEONORA CARRINGTON. Contributions by Gabriel Weisz Carrington, Leonora Carrington, Susan Aberth and Tere Arcq. Somerset, UK: Fulgur Press, 2020. 118 pp. Notes, bibliography, 14 x 16 cm color illustrations of all cards [same dimensions as the originals] and numerous other reproductions of paintings. ISBN 978-1-52725-869-3 US\$ 69.30

MAJOR ARCANA: LEONORA CARRINGTON. Includes 22 cards 9.5 x 12 cm and 16-page pamphlet with introductory essay "Le Jeu de Tarot of Leonora Carrington" by Rachel Pollack. First edition with the scent Huit étoiles by Aisha Shehu-Ansell. Somerset, UK: Fulgur Press, 2020. No ISBN. US\$ 51.98

TARO AS COLOUR. Ithell Colquhoun. Introduction by Amy Hale. Somerset, UK: Fulgur Press, 2018. 206 pp. Notes, bibliography, color illustrations same dimensions as cards. ISBN 978-1-5272-1976-2. \$51.98.

LEONORA CARRINGTON (1917-2011) AND Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988) are celebrated as artists, authors, and as women associated with surrealism in books such as Whitney Chadwick's *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985) and Susan Aberth's *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (2004). Most recently, Fulgur Press pays specific tribute to Carrington and Colquhoun as Tarot artists by way of *The Tarot of Leonora Carrington* [book], *Major Arcana: Leonora Carrington* [trumps-only deck originals c. 1955], and *Taro as Colour*, which includes Ithell Colquhoun's essay "The Taro as Colour," as well as illustrations of her complete 78-card Tarot deck (1970s). These exceptional publications provide both beautiful reproductions and good in-depth analyses of the decks.

¹ Note: Some of the historical background on early Golden Dawn-inspired Tarot decks provided in this review is also found in the current and forthcoming editions of my book *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks* (2004).

As women artists who created Tarot decks, Carrington and Colquhoun are heir to a very particular lineage stemming from the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (GD), including Mina Bergson/Moina Mathers (1865–1928), Pamela Colman Smith (1878–1951), Jessie Burns Park (1889–1964), and Frieda Lady Harris² (1877–1962). All four women collaborated with male esotericists whose names have dominated the credits for their projects. Increasing interest in Tarot and recognition of women artists as independent creators, rather than merely partners of men associated with major art historical and other movements, has added considerably to our understanding of their contributions to the decks they created.

The Golden Dawn was founded in London in 1888 by Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918), William Robert Woodman (1828–1891), and William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925) with Isis-Urania as its first Temple. One of the distinguishing tenets of the Golden Dawn was that women should be granted equal access and potential status within it. Four of the women who were most prominent in the early years of the order—Mina Bergson, Florence Farr, Maud Gonne, Annie Horniman—are the subject of Mary K. Greer’s *Women of the Golden Dawn: Rebels and Priestesses* (1995). Of these four, Mina Bergson is the most important here, as she not only married MacGregor Mathers, becoming Moina Mathers, she almost certainly created the original Golden Dawn Tarot (although her husband claimed it was his work) which was likely the deck loaned to Adeptus Minor grade initiates so that they could copy it (Greer 315).³ Some of Moina Mathers’s original designs were recovered from William Westcott’s papers by Golden Dawn scholar R.A. Gilbert and published as *The Golden Dawn Court Cards*.

By the early 1900s, the original Golden Dawn organization was so deeply factionalized that it divided into two groups. Alpha et Omega, founded by Mathers and his wife Moina in 1906, included Aleister Crowley (1875–1947;

² Frieda Lady Harris is Frieda Harris’s correct title because she became a “Lady” through marriage. According to an undocumented Wikipedia entry, she insisted on the designation Lady Frieda Harris. Since the placement of the word Lady before her given name indicates a false claim to the title, I have maintained the correct placement before her surname.

³ Greer cites Christina Stoddart in Ella Young’s autobiography *Flowering Dusk* (1945), who said that Moina Mathers produced the original Golden Dawn Tarot. Further, Greer writes, “notebooks belonging to Mathers—photographed in Raine, *Yeats, the Tarot and the GD*—feature drawings of several Tarot cards that appear to be in Moina’s hand. Colquhoun claims that Moina created paper-collage images of the deities.” From this information Greer quite reasonably wonders if Mathers only claimed to be the creator of Moina’s Tarot (Greer 448n2). Greer uses images from the *Tarocco Italiano* to illustrate her *Women of the Golden Dawn* because she believes Annie Horniman used it or one like it. Greer notes that this deck was “a particularly rare and beautiful Italian deck and must have been purchased for him [W.B. Yeats] by Annie who wintered every year in Italy. She certainly would have obtained a similar one for herself” (Greer 278-79, 444n12).

GD initiate 1898), Dion Fortune (1890–1946; initiated 1919), and Paul Foster Case (1884–1954; initiated c. 1920). Those moving away from Mathers formed the Hermetic Society of the Morgenrothe, which soon divided again. One group led by Arthur E. Waite (1857–1942; GD initiate 1891), became The Independent and Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn (1903-14). After he disbanded the Rectified Rite, Waite formed the new Fellowship of the Rosy Cross. Inkle Charles Williams was involved with this Fellowship from 1917 until at least 1927.⁴

It was during the time of The Independent and Rectified Rite that Waite commissioned Pamela Colman Smith to help create a new Tarot deck. Smith had been introduced to the Golden Dawn in 1901 by W.B. Yeats (1865–1939) and she went with Waite when the Order divided. Their deck, which ongoing research shows owes much more credit to Smith than Waite acknowledged, was published at the end of 1909.⁵ In 1971, this deck was picked up by U.S. Games Systems and is now undoubtedly the most widely-recognized and popular Tarot in the world.

The other group stemming from the division of Morgenrothe became the Stella Matutina (Morning Star), of which Israel Regardie (1907–1985) became a member in 1933; Regardie later released many of the Golden Dawn teachings and rituals to the public. As Anthony Fleming observes in the introductory notes to *The Golden Dawn Court Cards*, all decks other than that created by Moina Mathers that purport to be the original Golden Dawn Tarot are associated with Israel Regardie and “are entirely based on the Tarot cards used by the Stella Matutina which was a later off-shoot of the Golden Dawn. Regardie was never a member of the original Golden Dawn and therefore did not have access to the Tarot cards which were subsequently modified to some degree by the Stella Matutina” (Fleming in Küntz, 3).⁶

Meanwhile, Paul Foster Case was a member of the Alpha et Omega Temple of Thoth-Hermes in Chicago from 1918 until 1922, but left it to found

⁴ The illustrations of Tarot included with some editions of Charles Williams’s novel *The Greater Trumps* (1932) appear to be the *Milanese Tarot* by G. Sironi (Milan, 1882). See my own introduction to Nancy-Lou Patterson’s *Divining Tarot: Papers on Charles Williams’s The Greater Trumps and Other Works*, xxv. This anthology includes Patterson’s “The Triumph of Love: Interpretations of the Tarot in Charles Williams’s *The Greater Trumps*,” which first appeared in *Mythcon Proceedings III* (1974), the proceedings of the Mythopoetic Society conference of 1972.

⁵ Many of Smith’s contributions to the deck are presented in Marcus Katz and Tali Goodwin’s *Secrets of the Waite-Smith Tarot: The True Story of the World’s Most Popular Tarot* (2015). A broader view of Smith’s life is presented in the comprehensive *Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story*, with contributions by Stuart R. Kaplan, Mary K. Greer, Elizabeth Foley O’Connor, and Melinda Boyd Parsons (2018). Dawn G. Robinson’s *Pamela Colman Smith: Tarot Artist: The Pious Pixie* (2020) provides a detailed look at Smith’s life after she left the Golden Dawn behind and converted to Catholicism.

⁶ These decks include Robert Wang’s *The Golden Dawn Tarot* (1977).

what became known as the Builders of the Adytum. He commissioned the artist Jessie Burns Park (1889–1964), probably around 1931, to create a Tarot deck for this group that would improve upon Waite and Smith's. Virtually nothing is known of Parks's specific contributions to the result. The trumps are very similar to those of the *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot*, but unlike the *Rider-Waite-Smith*, the pips are not illustrated with human figures. The cards were initially published as black-and-white line drawings because Case thought that students should color their own decks. The trumps at least are now available in full color.⁷

In addition, former Golden Dawn member Aleister Crowley co-founded the A.:A.: (Argenteum Atrum) in 1907. Crowley joined the Ordo Templi Orientis (founded in 1902/03) in 1910 and took over as its head in 1922. Aleister Crowley and Frieda Lady Harris (1877–1962) began work on the *Thoth Tarot* in 1937. The initial plan was to spend about six months creating a deck that followed the original Golden Dawn specifications, but the project soon grew into Crowley's reconceptualized deck and ultimately took some five years to complete. In 1944, the paintings were reproduced in *The Book of Thoth* in a limited edition; in 1971, the deck itself was finally printed in color from photographs of the original paintings.⁸

Carrington and Colquhoun are part of the next generation of this tradition of Golden Dawn-inspired Tarot-making and their cards reflect the changing art styles of their day in that they were less immersed in the Art Nouveau and Symbolist tendencies characteristic of the Mathers, Smith, Parks, and Harris decks. Both were British artists who became associated with Surrealism through their creative practices, associates (including Roberto Matta), exhibitions, and relationships with men. Carrington had a liaison with Max Ernst (1937–1940) and then married the Mexican writer Renato Leduc who took her to New York City in 1941 and to Mexico in later 1942. She created her majors only deck around 1955 and it was more or less unknown until it was exhibited as part of a 2018 retrospective exhibition *Leonora Carrington: Magical Tales* held at the Museu de Arte Moderno in Mexico City. Tere Arcq was a contributor to the associated exhibition catalog, and is also co-author with Susan Aberth, of "As in a Mirror with Multiple Facets: Leonora Carrington and the Tarot" in Fulgur's *The Tarot of Leonora Carrington*.

As a child Carrington was fascinated by her gypsy and Irish heritage (*Tarot of LC* 68). By the time she went to Paris with Ernst, she already knew about

⁷ The line drawings of the cards are available for download at the B.O.T.A. Online store < <http://store.bota.org/tarotdecks.html>>. Color reproductions of the B.O.T.A. deck are available at < <http://www.esotericmeanings.com/introduction-to-the-b-o-t-a-tarot-deck/>>. The card illustrations in Paul Foster Case's *The Book of Tokens* are all in color.

⁸ See Richard Kaczynski, "Frieda Lady Harris," and "The Crowley-Harris Thoth Tarot: Collaboration and Innovation."

Tarot through such books as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), more peripherally through W.B. Yeats's *Stories of the Red Hanrahan* (1904), and almost certainly Waite and Smith's *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot* (1909). After moving to Mexico, her knowledge of divination systems evolved by way of books, such as Dion Fortune's *The Mystical Qabalah* (1935), and her friendships with artists and writers, such as Remedios Varo (1908–1963), Kati Horna (1912–2000), Matta (1911–2002), and Alejandro Jodorowsky (b. 1929), the author of *The Way of Tarot* (2004), as well as the Mexican poet Octavio Paz. Like Pamela Colman Smith, Carrington was interested in the theatre: she wrote novels, a play, and short stories, and also designed theatre sets. Unlike the *Waite-Smith Tarot*, however, her deck is limited to the majors, and it appears that those majors were all created around 1955, the date on two of the cards.

As Rachel Pollack and Aberth and Arcq establish in their essays, Carrington's cards show the influence of several Tarot decks, including the classic woodcut Marseilles-style (a type dating from the 1500s), *Rider-Waite-Smith*, and another created by Oswald Wirth (1889). Subsequently, as Aberth and Arcq demonstrate, Carrington continued to incorporate Tarot motifs into her mythopoeic art in ways that show an increasing sophistication and originality. Some of these paintings were clearly inspired by her interest in the writings of Carl Jung, especially, as Gabriel Weisz Carrington tells us, those involving the Trickster. In a lecture about his recently published memoir, "Gaby" emphasizes that his mother was only interested in the occult as a means of lending complexity and substance to the mythopoeic contexts and content of her art. The only séance he knows her to have conducted was performed as a joke on a too-serious visitor. For her, art and art-making was not ritualized or esoteric; it was always about serious creative play.⁹

Colquhoun was married to British surrealist Toni del Renzio (1943–1947). She created a full 78-card deck in Paul, Cornwall, in the 1970s that was exhibited briefly in 1977 at the Newlyn Gallery in Cornwall and then forgotten until Adam McLean printed a limited edition of it in 2009. An essay by Amy Hale, who is also the author of *Ithell Colquhoun: Genius of the Fern Loved Gully* (2020), elucidates Colquhoun's Tarot art in the Fulgur publication.

Unlike Carrington, Ithell Colquhoun's writings and deck demonstrate an ongoing and very serious interest in esoteric organizations practicing structured ritual and meditation. She was initiated into a number of these organizations, including at least two with a dedicated interest in Tarot: the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) and, in the 1960s, Tamara Bourkhoun's Golden Dawn

⁹ Gabriel Weisz Carrington discussed many aspects of his mother's work in "Leonora Carrington, My Mother," a zoom lecture offered by The Last Tuesday Society in conjunction with the Morbid Academy (2021). "Gaby" has also just published a memoir *The Invisible Painting: My Memoir of Leonora Carrington* (2021).

inspired Order of the Pyramid and Sphinx (*Taro as Colour* 10). Like Smith and Carrington, she also wrote in various genres; she wrote a novel, poetry, travel books about Ireland and Cornwall, and numerous undated essays on esoteric subjects and Tarot gathered in Steve Nichols's *The Magical Writings of Ithell Colquhoun* (2007; 2020).¹⁰ Colquhoun created her Tarot after decades of esoteric study, ritual practice, and authorship in the field. The images she created are not illustrative, as are Smith's and Carrington's. They are far more reminiscent of the mythopoeic abstractions of artists such as Mark Rothko, but, unlike the abstract expressionists and post-painterly abstractionists, her Tarot images derive from a close study and personal re-interpretation of Golden Dawn-based color symbolism.

The Fulgur publications on Carrington and Colquhoun will be revelations to Tarot and art historians, as well as devotees of both visual and literary mythopoeia. The authors contributing to both books and the deck provide substantive and informative text and the book illustrations are not only printed in high quality color, they are the same size as the originals. The Carrington deck is a special prize for students and collectors. Not only are the card images beautifully executed, they are printed on high quality stock with plain silver backs suggestive of the gold and silver foil the artist used on the original images. The haute couture scent that wafts from the equally high-quality deck box is the perfect accent for its contents.

Some *Mythlore* readers might find that Tarot is both a step beyond and a step to the side of what they habitually think of as mythopoeic art; that is, the illustrations of fiction by the Inklings and other authors of mythopoeic literature. Carrington's and Colquhoun's images are not secondary to literary narratives, they are visualizations of archetypes presented in a form that facilitates new evocations of the same archetypes in the viewer or deck user. All three Fulgur publications are extraordinary testaments to the contributions of women artists to the history of Tarot. The new availability of Carrington's deck as a deck, however, rather than solely as illustrations commemorating the artist's oeuvre is a unique reminder of the importance of visual mythopoeia to the art of Tarot.

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¹⁰ Readers interested in Ithell Colquhoun's own writings may look to *The Magical Writings and Sword of Wisdom: MacGregor Mathers and the Golden Dawn* (1975; now available as a badly scanned ebook on amazon).

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