

# A Brief History of the Tarot

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The 78-card Tarot deck originated in the early to mid 1400s in Italy. The 56-card *Minor Arcana* is based on early playing cards, being divided into four suits. The Tarot adds 22 Trumps or *Major Arcana*. Only 17 cards have survived from the oldest Tarot deck currently in existence, the Gringonneur deck. However the Tarot of Marseilles, created around 1500, is complete and available to modern readers who will clearly recognize the Trump images. The Sola Busca deck, contemporary with the Tarot of Marseilles, is the only ancient deck to illustrate the Minor Arcana with characters instead of the symbols used on playing cards. This deck has been reproduced in a limited edition under the name the Ancient Enlightened Tarot.

Many scholars believe the cards were perpetuated in the West to safeguard certain teachings through the Dark Ages and the Inquisition. While scholars do not agree on what those secret teachings might have been, the cards do seem to be coded in some way: Tarot images tend to evoke strong emotional responses, pulling the viewer into the realm of folklore, mythology, and legend. As Richard Cavendish notes in *The Tarot*, "They give the impression of holding the key to some vital secret which cannot quite be put into words, which is almost in the mind's grasp when it slips elusively away."

This lure of hidden knowledge attracted Eliphas Levi to the Tarot in the mid 1800s. During this time, America and England were undergoing a fascination with mysticism which supported a growing interest in the Tarot. Informed by a professional Paris-based fortuneteller named Alliette, Levi wrote a treatise on the cards that proved to be highly influential. One important group he influenced was the Order of the Golden Dawn which was formed in the 1880s. Although short-lived, this Order highlighted the Tarot in its teachings, and members of this group were key in shaping the Tarot as we know it today.

Golden Dawn member Arthur Edward Waite, together with artist Pamela Coleman Smith, created the Tarot deck that later came to be viewed as the

standard deck and that remains the best-known deck today. Although she did not receive credit for her work during her lifetime, Smith changed the standard of the Minor Arcana from geometric symbols to detailed scenes illustrating human actions. Her images were inspired by those on the Sola Busca deck. Waite changed the name and the order of some Major Arcana cards to fit his spiritual philosophy.

Aleister Crowley, another member of the Golden Dawn, also created his own deck which is still popular today. He named his deck after the Egyptian god Thoth, and like Waite changed the names of some of the Trump cards. Unlike Waite who looked to ancient decks for the main images on the cards, Crowley completely reinterpreted the images in collaboration with artist Lady Freida Harris. Their cards are rich in Cabalistic, astrological, and mythological symbols. However their Minor Arcana cards are less detailed than those in Waite's deck.

After the spiritualist craze of the 1800s died down, Tarot gained a new foothold through the revival of Paganism and through Jungian psychology. Neopaganism was popularized in America and England by Margaret Murray in the early 1900s and by Gerald Gardner, a colleague of Crowley's, in the mid 1900s. Tarot remains popular today among Murray's and Gardner's spiritual heirs. Another influential figure is Carl Jung, founder of analytical psychology. While his theories were not influenced by the Tarot, he did acknowledge the Tarot in his work. Jung notes in *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious* that "the set of pictures in the Tarot cards were distantly descended from the archetypes of transformation." The popularity of Jung's theories has increased interest in the Tarot over the last century.

Traditionally, Tarot has been used for divination, seeing what is hidden, sometimes in the future, sometimes in the past or present. This is still a common usage for the cards. But the Tarot is just as likely to be used as an aid for psychological transformation, tapping into archetypes: "the symbol of the sun, or the symbol of the man hung up by the feet, or the tower struck by lightning, or the wheel of fortune" in Jung's words. The images on the cards are the most powerful aspect of the Tarot. Over a thousand decks, with a wide variety of images, are currently in print.

**Excerpt from *Luna Blanca's Tarot Book* available on Amazon:**

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0692531491?ie=UTF8&tag=maryasgoddessvir&camp=1789&linkCode=xm2&creativeASIN=0692531491>

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**About the Author:**

Luna Blanca has been a professional Tarot reader and spiritual teacher since the late 1990s and has been working with the Tarot for over twenty years. An eclectic Pagan by faith, she is the founder of the Goddess-oriented White Moon Tradition and author of the yearlong course White Moon Studies. She works under another name as a college professor, poet, and photographer.