Tarot History 15-16th Century

Research compiled by Sherry Shone

<1300 - 1400

600 - 700 Chinese money-suited cards are believed to be the oldest ancestor to the Latin suit-system.

1100s - Playing cards were spreading throughout the Asian continent and later came into Egypt.

1200s - Playing cards arrived in Persia

1279 - First Paper Mill in Italy

1300-1400 - Playing cards were a Chinese invention which found their way to Europe

1300 - 1400 - The concept of a procession of allegorical figures “triumphing” or defeating the preceding figure is depicted in art.

1379 - Code of Nurembger permitted card playing, three years later is was approved in Florence.

1397 - Parsians could play cards (but only on the weekends).

1400-1500

1400s - Malmuk cards (most like European playing cards). Shown below conserved in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul. These cards date from the late 15th Century, but older single cards or fragments are known dating back to the 13th Century.
1424. Marchesa Parisina orders two packs of inexpensive cards for her girls. This may be first evidence that cheap printed cards were being produced.

1440 - Tarot “possible creation year” somewhere in northern Italy. The earliest surviving Milanese Tarot decks come from this period. As noted, the Tarot deck consisted of a regular 56-card deck, augmented with a hierarchy of 22 allegorical trump cards.

1441. Francesco Sforza, future Duke of Milan, marries Bianca Visconti in Milan. Rumored to have triggered a “triumph” deck for the wedding.


1450. Francesco Sforza writes a note requesting two decks of carte da trionfi (trumps), or if not available, carte da giocare (playing cards). He wants “the finest you can find” and needs them by Sunday. This shows there was a standard Trionfi deck that didn’t have to be described, and that was easily purchased.
1456 & 1457. Count Borso commissioned the artist da Vicenza to create two very luxurious packs of carte grande da trionfi with 70 cards.

Colleoni-Baglioni and Francesco Sforza, was produced around 1451.[5] It contains 74, i.e. 20 trumps, 15 face cards, and 39 "pip" cards. The Pierpont-Morgan library in New York has 35, the Accademia Carrara has 26 in its catalogue, while the remaining 13 are in the private collection of the Colleoni family in Bergamo. The two missing trumps are the Devil and the Tower. Any reproductions only have facsimiles of the Devil and Tower.

Cary- Yale Named after the Cary Collection of Playing Cards, absorbed into the Yale University Library in 1967, it is also known as the Visconti di Modrone set, and has been dated back to around 1466. Some scholars have, conversely, suggested this may be in fact the oldest of sets, perhaps commissioned by Filippo Maria Visconti at the onset of the project. 67 cards (11 trumps, 17 face cards and 39 "pip" cards) have survived, which has led to the (disputed) suggestion that, given the distribution of the Pierpont-Morgan deck, the total number of cards when this set was produced should have amounted to 86. The Cary-Yale is the only historical Western deck with six ranks of face cards, as the "Damsel" and the "Lady on horse" supplement the traditional King, Queen, Knight and Jack. The trumps also contains the three theological virtues which appears only here and in Minchiate decks.

Bonifacio Bembo - This set is named after Giovanni Brambilla, who acquired the cards in Venice in 1900.[9] As of 1971, the deck has been in the catalogue of the Brera Gallery in Milan. Apparently commissioned to Bonifacio Bembo by Francesco Sforza in 1463, it now consists of 48 cards with only two trumps - the Emperor and the Wheel of Fortune. All face cards have a gilt background, while the pip cards have a silver one.

The seven remaining face cards are: Knight and Jack of cups; Knight and Jack of denari; Knight, Jack and Queen of bastoni. Almost all "pip" cards have survived, as this set is only missing the four of denari.

1500 - 1600s

1492- "Charles VI" Tarot cards. Three decks were bought for King Charles VI of France. Commissioned from artist Jacques Gringonneur. Consisted of 17 cards, painted on vellum, with golden edges. Red/Blue
pigments were used by mummy’s dust¹ (or blood) and lapis lazuli.² They currently are in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.

Early 1500s - Minchiate deck invented in Florence. An expanded tarot deck with additional trumps depicting the four elements and twelve zodiac signs. The Knights become Centaurs.

By the 1500s, the Italian aristocracy was enjoying a game known as “tarocchi appropriati,” in which players were dealt random cards and used thematic associations with these cards to write poetic verses about one another. These predictive cards were referred to as “sortes,” meaning destinies or lots. Tarocchi is the Italian word for the French word Tarot

Oh my! 1534. The Speaking Cards by Pietro Aretino published in Venice. Part of an erotic literary text that gives information on the names and order of the trumps during the course of a dialog. Aretino also wrote (Talanta ) describes, in scene XIII, allegorical tool for the Chariot we know of today - interesting note - this occurs in scene 13....³

1575 - Venice first printed account of a game of tarot.

1500s - Tarot de Marseille - contains fifty-six cards in the four standard Suits. In French-language versions of the Tarot de Marseille, those suits are identified by their French names of Bâtons (Rods, Staves, Sceptres, or Wands), Épées (Swords), Coupes (Cups), and Deniers (Coins). These count from Ace to 10.

Significance of the shape of the swords. Opposite of Italian pips in the playing card games - the Marseille suit of swords are drawn as abstract symbols in curved lines, forming a shape reminiscent of a mandorla. This figure (oval figures) is an architectural feature that distinguishes holy influence.

On the even numbered cards, the abstract curved lines are all that is present. On the odd numbered cards, a single fully rendered sword is rendered inside the abstract designs.

The suit of wands is drawn as straight objects that cross to form a lattice in the higher numbers; on odd numbered wands cards, a single vertical wand runs through the middle of the lattice.

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¹ The pigment, a favored shade of the Pre-Raphaelites, was first made with Egyptian mummies, both cat and human, that were ground up and mixed with white pitch and myrrh. It had a great fleshy color, but due to the actual fleshy components it would crack over time. Martin Drölling, who painted the work shown above, reportedly used the mummies of French kings dug up from Saint-Denis in Paris.

² Lapis Lazuli pigment was made from grinding up Lapis Lazuli semi-precious stones. Its use goes back to the 6th century in Afghanistan, but its popularity really took off with wealthy Renaissance patrons who wanted the stunning blue on the robes of Mary and Jesus in religious paintings. The “ultra marine” color, as it was also known, largely disappeared as it was so incredibly expensive and required quarries to collect the stones.

³ In scene XIII, where Aretino describes the encounter of Talanta with the parasite Branca and the Captain Tinca, among the attributes which the latter, hopelessly in love with Talanta, addresses to her, along with “helmet of my head, armor of my back, legging of my shins, harness of my steed, pendant of my medals”, we also find “chariot of my triumph”, because he considered Talanta the object who motivated or rather ‘conducted’ him to search for situations to conquer. Although this speech is not in the context of the game then called “Triumphs”, but the same Renaissance game, called “ludus tarochorum” in the period in which Aretino composed this comedy, it appears of some importance when one considers that the meaning of that card would be carrus triumphalis, i.e. the pursuit of personal triumph and victory, of which the chariot becomes an allegorical tool meaning not only “movement toward”, but also a “motivational push”.


On the tens of both swords and batons, two fully rendered objects appear imposed on the abstract designs. The straight lined wands and the curved swords continue the tradition of Mamluk playing cards, in which the swords represented scimitars and the wands polo mallets.

The Valet de Bâtons (French > "Page of Batons") is another card worth noting in this regard. In the Tarot de Marseille, the title of that card generally appears on the side of the card.

The Death XIII card is generally left unnamed in the various old and modern versions of the Tarot de Marseille, but it is worth noting that in the Noblet Tarot de Marseille (circa 1650), the card was named LAMORT (Death). In at least some printings of the French/English bilingual version of the Grimaud Tarot de Marseille, the XIII card is named "La Mort" in French and named "Death" in English. In many modern tarot decks (e.g., Rider-Waite-Smith), the XIII card is named Death. In at least one 19th-century Italian tarot deck (e.g., the one photo reproduced by Italian publisher Lo Scarabeo as the "Ancient Italian Tarots" deck), the card is named "IL TREDICI" (Italian > "Thirteen").

1589 - Venice. Records of the Inquisition show the Devil card being used as a focus of veneration and prayer. It’s notable that Tarot itself is not considered evil by association.

Resources:

Written
The Tarot Bible Kathleen McCormack

Videos
Paul Gipp, Tarot for Normal People:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoUXNX8GQjo
Tarot College Course:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNU4wdMSEj0

Websites
http://www.tarotpedia.com/wiki/Tarot_History
http://tarotwheel.net/history/card%20playing/early%20history%20outside%20europe.html
http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/research/library-catalogs-databases/guide-cary-collection-playing-cards
http://www.strangehistory.net/2012/06/23/the-eastern-origins-of-playing-cards/
http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3432694
http://www.letarot.it/page.aspx?id=238&lng=eng