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ART

Reading the Room: Tarot Turns Up at the Morgan



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By **Friday Jones**



It's Lammas weekend — the old harvest sabbat, when the wheel turns toward the dark half of the year and the reaping begins — and there's nowhere more fitting to spend a Tuesday morning than the Morgan Library's marbled halls, now hung wall to wall with 500 years of divinatory art. "Tarot! Renaissance Symbols, Modern Visions" runs through October 4, and it is, whether the institution fully clocks it or not, one of the most feminist shows in New York this season.



Tarot! Renaissance Symbols, Modern Visions

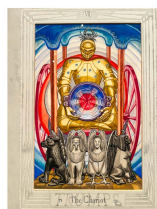
I arrived expecting a scholar's peace and got a crowd instead. New York's business always shocks me, hermit that I am. But the crowd was my crowd — the crones out in force, a good smattering of the young, the dramatic, the tattooed. All of us thrilled to be haunting the same gilded halls that once housed a plutocrat's private manuscripts. Something has shifted when a Renaissance rare-book library needs crowd control for a tarot show.



The Millennial gaze: Tarot at the Morgan

The Bones of It

The exhibition splits cleanly into two acts. "Renaissance Symbols" opens with the Morgan's own [Visconti-Sforza](#) cards — gilded, hand-painted, commissioned in the 1440s for a Milanese ducal wedding, reunited here for the first time in North America with sister cards from Italy's [Accademia Carrara](#). These were, the curators insist, a courtly game of skill. Full stop. No mysticism, no fate-weaving, just aristocrats at play.



The Chariot- Lady Frieda Harris

Then the show leaps — as these institutional histories always do — three centuries forward, into "Modern Visions": the French occultists of the 1780s who first draped tarot in supernatural mystique, the British Occult Revival, Pamela Colman Smith's 1909 [Rider-Waite-](#)

[Smith](#) deck, Aleister Crowley and Lady Frieda Harris's luminous, unsettling [Thoth](#) cards from the 1930s. A video installation splices together decades of tarot-in-film — not, I think, to educate, but to prove how completely occult philosophy has soaked into the culture's bloodstream. Card game indeed.



Tarot! Renaissance Symbols, Modern Visions

The Gap in the Middle

Here's where I have to put my Hierophant hat on for a moment, because the Morgan's timeline has a Kabbalah-sized hole in it, and it's worth naming out loud.



Sky Diving- Bettye Saar

The official story is... tidy. Courtly game, then three centuries of silence, then French occultists in the 1780s invent The Mystical Reading. It is also not the only story serious scholars are telling. A few threads worth pulling: [The Sola-Busca deck](#) (1491) — the earliest complete surviving tarot deck — has been the subject of real academic argument that it was never a parlor game at all. Independent researcher Peter Mark Adams's [The Game of Saturn](#) reads the deck's genuinely strange imagery as an encoded Hellenistic-astrological, Neoplatonic ritual system built for an elite Renaissance magical cult — hiding casually behind a card game.



The Hermiless- Rithika Merchant

Cartomancy fragments predate the "official" 18th-century birth of divination. Historian [Ross Caldwell](#) has traced a 1480 sermon by a Dominican friar condemning cards specifically because they were being used to divine the future — three centuries before the French occultists the Morgan credits with the innovation. A 1540 book by [Francesco Marcolini](#) goes further, laying out how ordinary playing-card suits could answer specific fortune-telling questions.



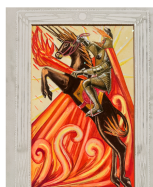
The Star- Remedios Varo

Also look to Frances Yates's [Art of Memory](#), which gave later scholars the framework to read the twenty-two trumps as a Hermetic [memory palace](#) — a way of storing cosmic and psychological knowledge behind the harmless face of a card game, precisely so the Inquisition would look right past it.



Memo To Stevie Wonder- Bettye Saar

None of this proves tarot was "always" divinatory — the Morgan's caution is scholarly, not dishonest. But "originally just a game" and "an elite magical technology hidden in plain sight as a game" are not mutually exclusive claims, and a library built on a robber baron's manuscript collection might have entertained the second possibility with a little more curiosity. The kabbalistic and Hermetic undercurrents that later occultists layered onto the cards didn't spring from nowhere in 1780s Paris — they landed on symbolic soil that had been tilled for that purpose for three hundred years.



Where the Show Reveals Itself

Put the historiography down, because the art is the point, and the art is glorious.



Death- Lady Frieda Harris

[Lady Frieda Harris](#)'s original gouaches for Crowley's Thoth deck are on view, and they're staggering in person — jewel-toned, mathematically obsessive, decades ahead of anything else being painted in Britain at the time.

The Surrealists get their due: [Leonora Carrington](#) and [Remedios Varo](#), women who built entire cosmologies out of tarot's symbolic grammar while their male peers got the gallery walls and the reviews. The show's contemporary wing brings it home with [Kim Krans](#) and [Sola Saar](#) — both post-'80s babies, both leading a genuinely millennial reinvention of the form — alongside [Bea Nettles](#)'s photographic decks and [Dorothy Iannone](#)'s 60's psychedelic, unapologetically erotic interpretations.

And then there's [Alison Saar](#) and [Bettye Saar](#), whose work here is some of the most textural, most symbolically loaded in the entire exhibition — a Black feminist mysticism running its own current through cards that Europe likes to claim as entirely its own invention.



Dorothy Iannone's "far out" deck is just getting started

Tally it up and the show is feminist practically by accident: women creators and metaphysicians outnumber the men roughly four to one across the modern galleries. The Morgan may have undersold its own history, but it did not undersell its women.



The Magician, surrealist status

The Invitation

So here's [Llammás](#), the harvest turning toward the dark, and here's a room full of witches, femmes and one unfortunate five-year-old kicking the shared gallery couch while his mother decided I was the problem — no children were eaten, for the record, the crones and I showed remarkable restraint.



The Star- Bea Nettles

The muggles at large have accepted a tidy story: tarot as parlor amusement that only later, almost by accident, picked up mystical baggage. Flip that switch. Sit with the Sola-Busca cards a while longer. Ask why a 15th-century friar was already worried about people using cards to see the future, decades before anyone was supposedly doing that. The cards have always known more than the official record credits them for — much like the women who kept them alive in the shadows of the mundane art world, generation after generation, until a pirate's library finally made room.

"Tarot! Renaissance Symbols. Modern Visions" is on view at the Morgan Library & Museum through October 4, 2026.

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