The woman behind tarot’s strange beauty

# I wonder how Pamela Colman Smith worked it out in reverse, led by her own creativity straight to the Catholic Church—the place I’ve tried to leave.

by Jessica Mesman in the May 2023 issue

(*Century* photo by Daniel Richardson)

My social circle of lapsed Catholics, exvangelicals, and other “deconstructing” Christians may have lost the narrative threads we followed for much of our lives, but we can rattle off our rising signs, Enneagram numbers, and Myers-Briggs types like our Social Security numbers. In the absence of the ready-made life story I had in Catholicism, it sometimes feels like I’m begging whatever magic mirror I can find to *please, tell me who I am!*

For many of those searching for new spiritual practices and meaning, reading tarot cards satisfies a yearning for a coherent personal story transmitted through a ritual. Tarot also encourages the development of private intuition, something that has too often been dismissed, belittled, or even vilified in patriarchal traditions. A 2021

survey showed that 51 percent of a sample population between the ages of 13 and 25 engage in tarot cards or fortune-telling. But tarot is also surging in popularity with my elder millennial and Gen X peers. I recently saw a tarot T-shirt in a J.Crew store—not exactly a purveyor of trends for anyone under 30.

Many Christians object to tarot because of its associations with divination and fortune-telling. But others are increasingly using the cards as a tool for self-directed spiritual contemplation. Gil Stafford, a retired Episcopal priest and spiritual director, incorporates tarot in his practice along with the Enneagram and Myers-Briggs. Brittany Muller, author of *The Contemplative Tarot: A Christian Guide to the Cards*, uses tarot cards in conjunction with the Book of Common Prayer to practice *visio divina*. Writer and spiritual director Carl McColman offers an online course on the anonymous book *Meditations on the Tarot*, a classic text of Christian mysticism with an afterword by Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (a copy of which can be seen in a photo of a stack of books on Pope John Paul II's desk).

What draws me personally to investigate tarot is not fortune-telling or ritual practice or even the desire to incorporate my own feminine wisdom into my Christian beliefs. It is the cards' strange beauty—and, if I'm honest, their aura of forbiddenness, imprinted upon me in Catholic school in the 1980s during the Satanic Panic.

I have always been particularly fascinated by the art nouveau design of the classic Rider-Waite tarot deck, first published in England in 1909 and still the most famous and popular deck on the market. Its bright, flat colors and heavy black outlines, its central figures (the Hermit, the Priestess) in vaguely medieval dress posed on intricately adorned backgrounds—these are likely what you imagine when you think of tarot.

Reading about the history of the deck, I was surprised by a minor detail. Its illustrator, artist Pamela Colman Smith, had grown up without any particular religious affiliation. After finishing the project, however, she converted to Catholicism.

While Smith has recently become highly regarded in occult and feminist circles, she was largely ignored in the narratives of the famous people with whom she collaborated in her time. If you look closely at early modernist circles of artists and writers, however, she pops up like Forrest Gump—performing with Bram Stoker's theater troupe, showing her paintings in photographer Alfred Stieglitz's gallery,

appearing as Madame Sosostris with her “wicked pack of cards” in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, being initiated into the secret society the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn alongside W. B. Yeats.

If you prize tarot as a feminist practice outside the control of patriarchal religion, you may be dismayed, though not necessarily surprised, to hear that the history of the Rider-Waite deck is yet another tale of the exploitation of a woman’s gifts and talents. I was. In her biography *Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic*, literary scholar Elizabeth Foley O’Connor writes that Smith was paid very little for her tarot art and received no credit, though she signed her initials in a sort of caduceus form in the bottom right corner of each image. It was not a very good gig. In a 1909 letter to Stieglitz, she described the project as “a big job for very little cash!”

A woman artist doing the heavy lifting for no credit is, again, a common enough tale, so I was more bemused to learn about Smith ending up a Roman Catholic and custodian of a tiny chapel called Our Lady of the Lizard. (*Lizard* is a geological term describing the land mass where the chapel was located, not, to my disappointment, a reptilian deity.) But I could find next to nothing about her conversion, except that she cared for a group of retired priests in Cornwall. The stories I’ve read about Smith often skip the detail of her conversion altogether or end her story there with a kind of implied shrug: What are we to make of this? Writer Michelle Tea, author of *Modern Tarot*, describes Smith’s conversion as a “sad turn for a spiritually adventurous artist,” with little further explanation, though she does clarify that to convert to Catholicism in early 20th-century England was also the mark of a true eccentric.

When I look at my Rider-Waite deck, which I keep in a glass-front cabinet with my collection of missals, rosaries, and various other Catholic paraphernalia, I wonder how she worked it out in reverse, led by her own creativity and intuition straight to the place I’ve tried to leave.

THE HISTORY OF TAROT is hard to pin down, but it probably originated in 15th-century Italy as a strategy card game of trumps. Only later did the cards become a spiritual tool, used for both contemplation and divination. The trump cards became the 22 cards of the Major Arcana: the Fool, the Magician, the Empress, the High Priestess, the Hierophant, the Lovers, the World, and so on. The remaining 56 cards are called the Minor Arcana and include suits of swords, cups, wands, and coins.

To read tarot yourself, you typically begin by praying or meditating with a specific question in mind, and then you draw the cards and contemplate what the symbols and imagery might suggest to the problem at hand. You might use a guidebook, your own intuition, or both. You might pull just one card, or you might create an elaborate pattern that covers your whole table. A typical three-card draw assigns one card each to your past, present, and future. Another formula assigns a card to the situation, one to the obstacle, and one to the solution. In my experience, there doesn't have to be any magic involved—not in the sense of manipulation of supernatural power—nor any extrasensory perception. Some creativity is required, however. The cards lend themselves to story, as Italo Calvino demonstrates in his 1969 book *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, in which he uses tarot cards to tell a series of fantastic tales.

Say you pull the seven of swords and the Magician reversed, a combination that came up for me in one of my first readings, for which I consulted a professional reader at a folding table in New Orleans's French Quarter. "You've been lied to," the reader said. The swords indicate deception. The Magician, when drawn upright, can symbolize God or divine power. Upside down, the card suggests manipulation and dirty tricks. This reading was relevant to the question I'd posed in my head—so much so that I gasped at the accuracy.

But was that in any way magical or supernatural? Haven't we all been lied to and manipulated at some point in our lives? The cards could be simply an aid for thinking through what we have learned from such experiences. Whether we find relevance in the story they tell is largely up to us. Or maybe magic isn't what you're thinking it is, sniffed my friend Joanna, a poet and tarot aficionado. This kind of negativity is probably what led another professional tarot reader to tell me my energy was so bad he couldn't read for me, then spritz me with rose water.

But whether you are using the cards for magical practice and divination or prayer and contemplation, the occult is an important part of tarot's history, and that alarms many Christians. Before the Satanic Panic and especially prior to the 20th century, the word *occult* did not have quite the same sinister connotation, though it was always a magnet for eccentrics. Occult could refer to any spiritual practice that drew from "secret" teachings or wisdom passed down from sages; its experiments often overlapped with mathematical and scientific exploration and with esoteric Christianity. Antoine Court de Gébelin and Éliphas Lévi, two important figures in the development of occult tarot practices, were both Christian mystics. It was Arthur

Waite, whose mother was Catholic and was an important figure in the early 20th-century British occult revival, who commissioned Smith to design, under his close supervision, the Rider-Waite tarot deck for the Rider and Company publishing house.

Waite, like Smith and Yeats, was a member of the legendary Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which included prominent Christians like Evelyn Underhill and influenced much of modern-day occult thought and practice, including Wicca. Waite said that practicing tarot was “research in symbolism; its study is a mystic experiment; and though it has been, is, and will be used for divination, it belongs to another realm and began therein.” Building on Lévi’s work, he claimed that tarot imagery could be traced back to Egyptian priests and the ancient (magical, probably fictional) Book of Thoth, not merely the card games of medieval Italians. He wanted to create a true tarot deck according to this received secret wisdom. When he met Smith, he recognized her as a “talented draughtswoman” who could realize his vision.

The cross-pollination of occult practice and Christian mysticism fascinated Waite and influenced Smith as she worked on her illustrations under his careful eye. While he recognized her artistic ability, Waite was condescending and dismissive in his assessment of her spiritual maturity and innate wisdom. The images on the cards are based on his scholarship, but they draw on a style and visual vocabulary she had already begun developing in her own work, which she had been selling and exhibiting for some time.

“While Waite emphasized the importance of his occult scholarship in the tarot project, it is obvious that it was also the product of Colman Smith’s psychic abilities and artistic skill,” writes O’Connor. She “contributed more than just the art; she imbued the deck . . . with her own intuitive gifts and symbolism.” Smith illustrated her fraught working relationship with Waite in a doodle—reproduced in O’Connor’s book—in which she, in a wizard’s hat, dutifully draws while a malignant-looking Waite stands over her shoulder.

Still, Smith’s relationship with Waite and her work on the cards had a profound impact on her spiritual life. She converted to Catholicism in July 1911, approximately 18 months after finishing the deck. While not much is known about her spiritual biography, O’Connor suggests that her conversion did not constitute a renunciation of her occult beliefs, as is often assumed, but rather a further continuation of mystical and occult interests she had held from childhood—influenced perhaps by

her grandparents, who were Swedenborgians.

Smith's tarot designs were also influenced by her work in the suffragist movement, for which she designed political posters in her distinctive style. Through her art, she was developing what O'Connor calls a "symbolic lexicon" of womanhood, and this lexicon is what so many women still find so exciting and fruitful for contemplation in the Rider-Waite deck. Feminist politics and occult spirituality have always gone hand in hand. In America, the spiritualist movement overlapped with women's suffrage and abolitionist movements. In England, esoteric religion was a "crucial space for the articulation of this unorthodox vision," writes Joy Dixon, author of *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*. Much of this rhymes with our own time. The current resurgence of interest in reclaiming witchcraft and ancestral spiritual practices outside patriarchal religion is likewise closely tied with activist politics and the questioning of power. O'Connor insists Smith is an important figure at this intersection, even if she is one we have heard little about.

Waite was just one example of a pattern of bad artistic relationships with overbearing men in Smith's life. She may also have been overlooked because of the "racial, sexual, class, and artistic prejudices of her time," suggests O'Connor. Smith was born to American parents in London in 1878, and she spent a portion of her childhood in Jamaica and the United States before moving back to London in 1900. She presented as somewhat androgynous, and she never married or had children. She was likely multiracial. Yeats's father once described her in awful terms ("she looks exactly like a Japanese") that reflected his own class snobbery and disdain for "'primitive' Americans" of dubious origin. Actor Ellen Terry called her a "Japanese toy." Artist Alphaeus Cole said she looked like a "Negress" and that this was why she fled the United States. She was also described as "Caribbean," which appears to be code for biracial.

For her part, Smith dressed in Afro-Jamaican garb and was a skilled teller of Jamaican folktales like the Anansi stories, which lent to her exoticism. Rather than trying to fit into polite society, it seems she leaned into the mystery of her origins, supposedly introducing herself to Arthur Ransome in her London salon as "goddaughter of a witch and sister to a fairy," which definitely would have added to her cachet with the Golden Dawn crowd. Terry called her "Pixie," a nickname and persona she seems to have eagerly adopted. But it seems likely that her persistent othering also prevented her from long-term financial and professional success and social respectability.

When I consider how little money and credit Smith got for her most influential work of art—still widely known as the Rider-Waite deck, though she is now listed as illustrator on the back of the box—it is apparent that the gender dynamics of occult England were no less fraught than those of Roman Catholicism. At any rate, the patriarchal structure of the Catholic Church didn't prevent Smith's enthusiastic conversion and her devotion, late in life, to a group of aged priests. Waite had believed tarot and Catholicism trod the same path toward mystical wisdom. But for the woman who created the striking imagery that remains beloved among present-day tarot users, the cards somehow formed a path that led her deeper into the church.

At least one of her contemporaries was disappointed in her decision. Of Smith's conversion, Yeats's younger sister Lily wrote to her father:

> She is now an ardent and pious Roman Catholic, which has added to her happiness but taken from her friends. She now has the dullest of friends, selected because they are R.C., converts most of them, half-educated people who want to see both eyes in a profile drawing.

O'Connor said in an interview that these snide remarks about Catholicism probably have more to do with the Yeats family's Protestant snobbery than with Smith's social or spiritual reality. Catholicism clearly didn't stifle her artistic production. Yes, she attended mass and confession and was an active parishioner at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Mayfair. But she also remained active in the suffrage movement and even had a major solo exhibition of work in New York. Post-conversion, she contributed illustrations to Bram Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm* and an edition of Charles Perrault's *Blue Beard*, a fairy tale of "unchecked patriarchal power," as O'Connor describes it, if ever there was one. She also illustrated an English edition of Paul Claudel's *The Way of the Cross* in 1917, in which the last woodcut features a priest giving communion.

Still, when she died a Catholic in Cornwall, she died poor. Nobody knows exactly where she is buried, but her Bible has been found. In the margins, she drew both tarot symbols and Catholic iconography, as if they were still in conversation with each other.

NOW, WHEN I LOOK AT THE TAROT cards Smith designed, I can’t help but search them for her story, a story that seems to end where my own began. My favorite is the Fool, and I am especially fond of her rendering. The Fool is the first card in the deck—the zero, the empty set, the blank beginning of the journey the other cards will depict. The Fool is so blithe, so lovely, so beautifully androgynous and full of promise as he stands in the sun, face held high in the light, dog dancing joyfully at his heels. And yet the Fool stands on a precipice, and the dog is probably not dancing at all, I think, but barking furiously, nipping at his heels, warning him that he’s about to fall to his death.

I am projecting a bit of myself onto the Fool. Not in his perpetual beauty but in his persistent naïveté. I have always thought of myself as a pessimist, but my therapist has assured me that I would not be quite so good at starting over if I wasn’t, at heart, an optimist. My spiritual journey seems characterized by this contradiction. I want more than anything to believe, but I am never quite convinced, so I go on searching for answers that I suspect I already know but cannot accept. The dog is that inner voice, reminding me of what I already learned.

The Fool also reminds me of Smith. The Fool is like the jester of a standard card deck, and Pixie, in her social circles, was a joker too, the one who never seemed to fit. She re-created herself numerous times, out of desire maybe, but also out of necessity, and in doing that spiritual work she left behind a legacy she probably never anticipated.

That is the story this particular card tells me: the Fool sets out, fresh-faced and full of optimism, no matter how many times he nearly plummets to his own demise. Each time you pull him from the deck, you get to start again.

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The *Century*'s community engagement editor Jon Mathieu discusses this article with its author, the *Century*'s associate editor Jessica Mesman, and they try a quick tarot reading.