

# Confessions of an Incurable Thothie

By all reliable accounts, Aleister Crowley was not a nice man. Yet he fathered one of the enduring icons of modern tarot – the Thoth deck – along with its remarkable companion volume, *The Book of Thoth* or *BoT*. A revisionist attempt is afoot to give the lion's share of the credit for the excellence of the deck to its artist, Lady Frieda Harris, in the same way U.S. Games recently did for Pamela Colman Smith's contribution to the Rider-Waite-Smith (RWS) deck by sneakily renaming it the "Smith-Waite Centennial Edition" (although, in my opinion, Smith hijacked much of Waite's deliberately veiled esoteric intent by substituting her own less exalted vision). In either case, that assumption amounts to a serious error of judgment. A careful read of the written correspondence between Harris and Crowley reveals just how much she was under the sway of his intellectual oversight. In Waite's case, it often seems like he and Smith weren't on the same page, and he may not have been paying close enough attention to her maverick input.

I've studied and divined with the Thoth deck for 45 years. It is truly the gold standard of esoteric tarot decks, often imitated but never equaled. While there are RWS clones that best the original, this has never been convincingly accomplished with the Thoth. (Although M.M. Meleen's *Tabula Mundi Colores Arcus* edition comes very close, and deserves to be considered second among equals.) Harris may have brought her exquisite Synthetic Projective Geometry to the table, but – admittedly having "little or no previous knowledge of the Tarot" – she would have had nothing in the way of philosophical substance to hang it on without Crowley's masterful direction. Trying to read with the Thoth in a purely intuitive way without recourse to the *BoT* is like trying to walk backwards on one leg in the fog with your eyes closed. It may be discouragingly difficult in places, but it is absolutely essential to a full appreciation of the deck.

If I were to pick one feature of the Thoth that I most admire, it would be the highly evocative Minor Arcana cards. Unlike the humble narrative vignettes that muddle the deeper meaning in the RWS minor cards, the Thoth minors are at most only "semi-scenic," but their profound, expressive use of pattern, color and mood speaks volumes for those readers with the finely-honed discrimination to decode it. They are the clearest evidence that Crowley's original intent to overhaul and not simply reject the "tradition of the Medieval Editors" was not completely lost in the translation. Once it's understood that they are closer in style to the Tarot de Marseille (which can be demonstrated by a card-by-card comparison), and benefit from an overlay of esoteric symbolism (number and element, astrological sign and planet, color theory, qabalistic notation, etc.), they read like a dream. The elegant artistic flourishes supplied by Harris are the icing on the cake.

Nearly as impressive are the court cards, especially when coupled with the verbal portraits provided by Crowley in Part Three of the *BoT*. His vivid depictions of the "moral characteristics" of each member of the tarot court provide the closest thing to a definitive psychological profile of each personality type that I have encountered to date. I went so far as to comb through the *BoT* and extract every useful keyword and phrase I could find, capturing them in a comprehensive table that also includes astrological keywords for the associated decans of the Golden Dawn's Chaldean system of correspondences.

The Major Arcana cards are truly the "spiritual meat" of Crowley's conceptual banquet. At a macroscopic level, they largely hew to traditional imagery, but the pervasive influence of his seminal *Book of the Law* is everywhere to be seen in the details. His goal of emptying "the whole of his Magical Mind pictorially" into the deck was achieved in fine form when the philosophical, metaphysical and scientific reflections recorded in Parts One and Two of the *BoT* are brought into the equation. Taken together, this rich stew of ideas and images makes for a lifetime study.