

# **THE FIRST TAROT EVER MADE: THE MARIGNOLLI-VISCONTI-BEMBO DECK**

**by Charles F Finn, PhD**

The first tarot deck ever made has been fully recovered and, despite the passage of time, all its images are in excellent condition. I was privileged to participate in the discovery of the deck. It has been analysed by several experts, who independently arrived at the same conclusion: the cards are authentic, and date to 1389. As a result, the origins of tarot are no longer a mystery. The fundamental questions about tarot history are finally answered.

Who invented tarot, and when? Tarot was invented in the year 1389, when Giovanni de' Marignolli (or John Marignolli, John of Marignola) commissioned a set of twenty-four playing cards as a gift for Valentina Visconti. He called the cards "twelve mirrors" because the images are pairs reflecting each other. The creation of this first tarot is linked to three names: Giovanni de' Marignolli, Valentina Visconti and the painter Bembo. The meeting between these three historical figures has never before been documented.

The occasion for which the pack was ordered was Valentina Visconti's departure from Italy to the Court of France, to consummate her marriage to Louis de Valois. Apparently, the cards were painted by one of the famous painter Bonifacio Bembo's ancestors and the templates must have remained in the Bembo family workshop, and used later by the painter's descendants to create the Visconti and Sforza-Visconti Tarot sets. The Marignolli-Visconti-Bembo pack is a half-century older than those and, as will be shown in the iconographic section, it surely influenced them.

The pack is accompanied by a love letter. Taking the first letter of each row of this, the word "*I Tarocchi*" appears vertically. This makes the 1389 letter the earliest document in which the name "tarot" appears. The letter also shows that this tarot set wasn't designed to supplement a regular deck of cards, but it was an individual set. The number of cards of this first tarot pack was twenty-four, not twenty-two (the standard number), or sixteen, as with the pack known to have been commissioned in 1425 by Filippo Maria Visconti.

All the backgrounds are gold and they contain the Visconti house heraldry, namely the eight-ray sun. The backs of the cards are dark brown, containing irregular spots of lighter shades, stains due to the passage of time, moisture or dryness of the environment in which they were kept. Some of them have more spots, others have less, due to the fact that the cards were kept in various location, with different environments (in the ground, in a metal box, in a library), which must have affected them differently.

Each card contains, in addition to a main character, an animal that reinforces its significance. The animal universe includes creatures known to the painter (the horse, the lamb, the wild bull, the deer, the pig, the cat, the monkey, the lion, the hawk, the bear, the rabbit, the owl, the peacock, the pigeon), real animals he encountered only in drawings and book descriptions (the rhinoceros, the elephant) and fantastic animals (the phoenix, the unicorn, the cerastes, the cerber, the amphisbaena, the dragon, the hydra, the beast with ten horns and seven heads). Typically, the symbolic animal supports the central figure, but there are a few exceptions (Force is fighting the lion, Saint George is fighting the dragon; both being typical representations). In subsequent tarot sets the animal component of this first set was almost entirely lost.

Several literary and visual works have influenced the images. The first obvious influence is the *Book of Revelation*. The deck contains the Antichrist, the Whore of Babylon, the Virgin and Christ. There are twenty-four cards, or twelve mirrors, twenty-four and twelve being the numbers most often used in the Apocalypse. The animal symbolism also refers to the Bible and the Apocalypse. The second obvious influence is Lorenzetti's *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, dated 1338-1339, a half-century before this tarot set. Just like in Lorenzetti's fresco panels, here we have the Good Governor (Christ) surrounded by the seven positive values, as well as the Bad Governor of Evil (the Antichrist), accompanied by the seven vices.

This deck explains the appearance of some tarot images (the Devil and the Angel), confirms the disappearance of others (Prudence) and informs us about the initial positive or negative connotations of some symbols (Popess, Pope), and shows that some tarot symbols later separated initially appeared together, in the same card image. (...)