Florentine Minchiate: The Fool's Journey

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> "The random conditions presented by a hand of cards are a metaphor for the circumstances one is born into [...]. The playing out of a hand of cards can be seen as a microcosmic reflection of the ever-changing world around us […]."
> -Timothy Husband, *The World in Play: Luxury cards 1430-1540* (10)

Ordinary decks of playing cards that most people are familiar with are made up of 52 cards containing four suits: Spades, Hearts, Diamonds, and Clubs. Additionally, a deck has kings, queens, and jacks as face cards as well as number cards 2 through 10. Instead of a 1, there is an ace which has the highest value. There are also two jokers which sometimes are not used. These modern suits were adopted into tradition from 15th-century French playing cards.

Card games were introduced to Europe in approximately the middle of the 14th century, probably from the Near East through Venice or from the Mamluk sultanate in Egypt through southern Italy, Sicily, or even Spain (Husband). Early card decks in Italy incorporated suits such as Cups (*copper*), Swords (*spade*), Batons (*gastonia*), and Coins (*denari*). Playing cards in Germany did not follow any standardized symbolism until the late 15th century when the suits became Acorns (*Eichel*), Leafs (*Laub*), Hearts (*Herz*), and Bells (*Schele*). Additionally, the number of cards in German decks often varied.

FIG 1 Bonafacio Bembo Emperor of Swords from the Visconti Tarot. (Mid 15th century) Commissioned for Bianca Maria, duchess of Milan.

FIG 2 Dante Alighieri "Divina Commedia" (1st half of the 14th century) from an illuminated manuscript of Inferno and Purgatorio.

Playing cards collectively and historically were not usually seen as "great works" of art. For example, because of their immediate association with popular activities like gambling, they were morally suspect and viewed as portals to poverty. For play as well as gambling, dice were typically more common than cards because cards required more skill. Also, because of their expense, cards were more often associated with individuals of higher social and economic status. Commissioned decks by members of nobility and the wealthy were created on par with illuminated manuscripts owing to factors such as cost and artistry (Dummet). By the mid 15th century, inventions such as the printing press made cards become more available to the general public as

they were easier and less costly to produce. During this period, knowledge and literacy also began to spread rapidly as not only cards, but books came to be mass produced. This coincided with the Renaissance revival of Greek and Roman art, literature, and philosophy.

FIG 4 Bonafacio Bembo Temperance from the Visconti Tarot. (Mid 15th century) Commissioned for Bianca Maria, duchess of Milan

FIG 3 Bonafacio Bembo Justice from the Visconti Tarot. (Mid 15th century) Commissioned for Bianca Maria, duchess of Milan.

It should be noted that authors like Chaucer and Dante, who tend to make note of the most minute details, make no mention of any type of cards. Possibly because of their elite social ranks or their links to the Roman Catholic Church, which viewed cards and gambling as sin. In fact, no mention of playing cards can be traced in the western literature before A.D. 1350 (Kendall). In Paris, an ordinance in 1397 prohibited play of various games including cards; however, by 1423 activities involving playing cards had evolved into modern popular form (Kendall).

"Tarocchi" or tarot cards, were originally created as a specific form of playing card deck used for different trick-taking games like tarocchini and French tarot (Zucker). Tarot cards in particular were often commissioned by members of the nobility throughout areas of Milan, Ferrara, Florence, Bologna (Wood). These cards have visual parallels to earlier literary and artistic works. For example, a 14th-century edition of Dante's *Divinia Commedia* features four half-length figures representing Justice, Power, Peace and Temperance (FIG. 1). Comparatively, the *Visconti Tarot* by Renaissance artist Bonafacio Bembo features four strikingly similar figures in the same postures as seen in the Emperor of Swords card (FIG. 2). Additionally, the representations of Justice (FIG. 3) and Temperance (FIG. 4) are featured in the *Visconti Tarot* paired with their traditional attributes: the sword, scales, and water jugs. These depictions became standard in tarot packs.

During the 18th and 19th centuries tarot cards were used for cartomancy and divination and evolved as a niche for artists to display specific iconographies often connected to some ideological system (Wood). In its modern form, the tarot pack derives from Italy and consists of 56 number cards divided into four suits, 21 trump cards, and a Fool or joker card for 78 cards in total. This traditional format for the tarot deck gained prominence beginning in the 15th century and remains standard today.

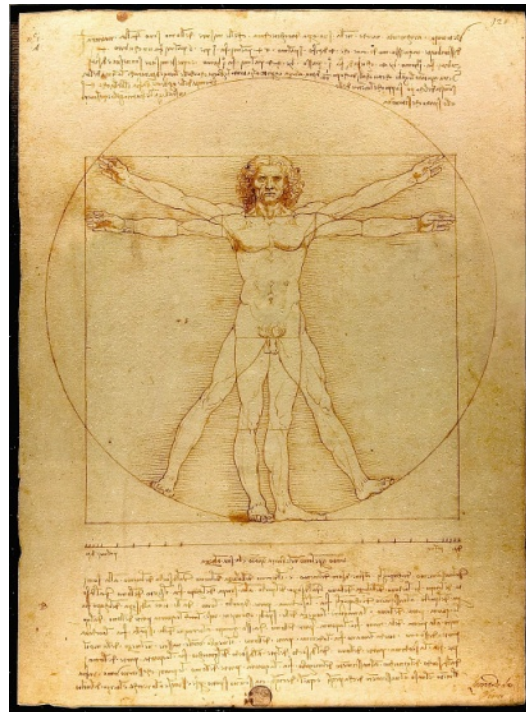**FIG 5 Anonymous Florentine Artist. Knight of Cups from the Florentine Minchiate (1791) HUAM.**

FIG 5 Da Vinci. The Vitruvian Man (1485) Accademia, Venice.

FIG 7 Da Vinci. Anatomical studies of the shoulder. (1510-11) Royal Library, Windsor.

FIG 8 Anonymous Florentine Artist . Diei di Tazze (10 of cups in tarot decks) from the Florentine Minchiate (1791). HUAM.

While numerology in the tarot is not historically documented as purposeful, the structure of the tarot deck contains interesting parallels with numerology (Kendall). For example, beginning in the 15th century, packs can be broken down into 56 minor + 21 major cards + 1 Fool card. The four suits in a deck correspond to the four seasons, the thirteen cards in each suit are equal to the number of moon phases annually. The sum of all four suits makes 52 which is the number of weeks in a year. Because the numbering in a suit ends at 10, it is plausible to place 11 with the Knave, 12 with the Queen, and 13 with the King. Adding all of the numbered points together comes to 364; adding the joker (Fool) gives the number of days in a year. Additionally, earlier decks had suit cards equaling 56, equivalent to the number of ways three dice can be thrown, 21 being the number of ways in which one pair of dice can be thrown. It is very possible that early card makers were influenced by dice (Kendall).

Minchiate is an early 16th-century Florentine card game, very similar to the tarot cards. While it is no longer widely played, the deck consists of 97 cards and contains the standard Italian suit symbols. Minchiate decks have 56 number cards, but also contain an expanded set of trump cards differentiating them from a standard deck of tarot cards (Husband). A well-preserved and complete 18th-century Minchiate deck is housed at the Harvard University Art Museums in Cambridge, Massachusetts (Harvard Universiy At Museums). The deck is dated to 1791 and is attributed to an anonymous Florentine artist. For the sake of this text; this deck will be called the "Florentine Minchiate."

**FIG 9 Anonymous
Florentine Artist. Queen of
Batons from the Florentine
Minchiate (1791) HUAM.**

**FIG 10 Anonymous
Florentine Artist. Queen of
Coins from the Florentine
Minchiate (1791) HUAM.**

The Florentine Minchiate deck, which is catalogued as a series of engravings, consists of the standard Italian suits: Cups, Swords, Coins, and Batons. The deck also features all twelve signs of the zodiac as part of the expanded trump collection. The figures in each card demonstrate an awareness of human anatomy. For example, individual figures are shown in a variety of body postures and facial expressions (FIG. 5). It is possible that the use of model sketch books and/or medical illustrations may have been employed in the decks' execution as there are similarities between images in the deck and works by well-known artists including Leonardo da Vinci (FIG. 6-7). Typical of 15th-century workshops, model books were consulted for figure drawing. The use of source-images is especially indicated in cards with figures that seem to gaze or point at nothing. Figures like these were most likely copied from books in which the figure was interacting

or looking at something related, but when copied for the deck of cards; became unneeded. (FIG 9-10)

The line work in the woodcuts is extremely fine, suggesting that whoever produced the deck and/or cut the printing block was highly trained. The Florentine Minchiate was probably produced in large quantities because close observation shows mass production in areas where fields of color strays away from the line work. The coin illustrated in the Queen of Coins is not filled completely with the yellow pigment (FIG 10). The Florentine Minchiate cards also all have a stippled border which frames each illustration which may be purely decorative. The Florentine Minchiate were produced much later than any of the previously discussed cards, so evolution and advancement in card production is not surprising.
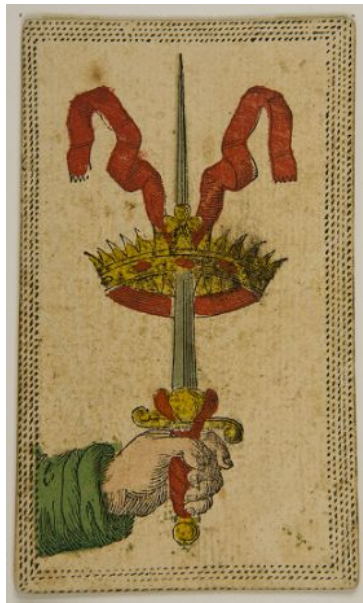

FIG 11 Anonymous Florentine Artist. Ace of Swords from the Florentine Minchiate (1791). HUAM.

FIG 12 Anonymous Florentine Artist. Ace of Coins from the Florentine Minchiate (1791). HUAM.

The individual cards of the Florentine Minchiate have no noticeable wear which suggests that they were seldom if ever used. By this time, card playing was widespread, and owing to the

mass-produced nature of these cards, the Florentine Minchiate was not likely an individualized commission but rather one of multiple decks that were produced.

Each suit symbol - Cups, Swords, Batons, Coins - in the Florentine Minchiate is fully illustrated and each card's value seems connected to the number of symbols illustrated on the designated card. For example, the Cups, which are arranged systematically and seem to float on the cards, can be connected to the pottery industry at Pesaro (Heilbrunn Timeline). As an important center of production since the Renaissance, Pesaro experienced a particular surge of success during the mid-eighteenth century due to the mastery of several notable craftsmen working in the city (FIG. 8). This link possibly explains why the cups are drawn in high detail and resemble fine pottery rather than simple pottery shapes. Similarly, the Swords are arranged very tightly and cross and overlap. The Coins are arranged in the same way the Cups are, and the Batons are similar to the Swords. Drapery and crowns are used to signify the Ace (FIG 11-12).

The landscapes on the cards vary but are mainly illustrated as a green strip running along the bottom of the card. The colors used throughout the deck primarily consist of red, blue, yellow, green, brown, and black. While multiple hands may have worked on the Florentine Minchiate's production, the overall style of the illustrations is coherent enough to suggest the work of one individual. The cards also have parallels in contemporaneous objects and imagery. For example, each suit has a face card depicting a human-animal hybrid figure (FIG. 13). The depiction of hybrid animals and species-crossing had been a subject of fascination long before the creation of the Florentine Minchiate.

FIG 13 Anonymous Florentine Artist. Knight of Swords from the Florentine Minchiate (1791) HUAM.

FIG 14 Botticelli. Pallas and the Centaur (1482) Uffizi, Florence.

FIG 15 Albrecht Dürer. Knight, Death, and the Devil (1513) The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
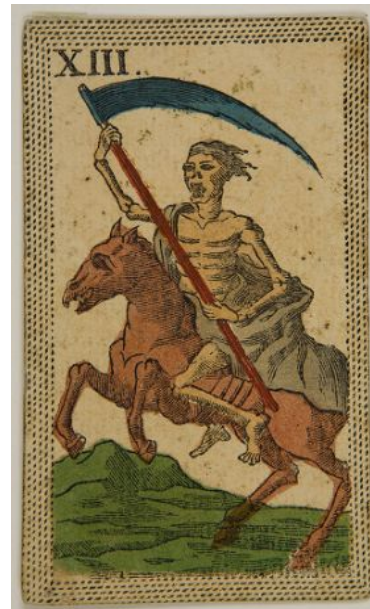

FIG 16 Anonymous Florentine Artist. La Morte, (Death in tarot) from the Florentine Minchiate (1791). HUAM.

For example, hybrid species can be seen in the works of Italian Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, Signorelli and Botticelli (FIG. 14). There are also some interesting parallels between the Florentine Minchiate and works by Northern Renaissance artists such as Bosch, Bruegel and Dürer, as well as the Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens. This indicates that certain forms and images had both widespread appeal as well as distribution over the course of several centuries.
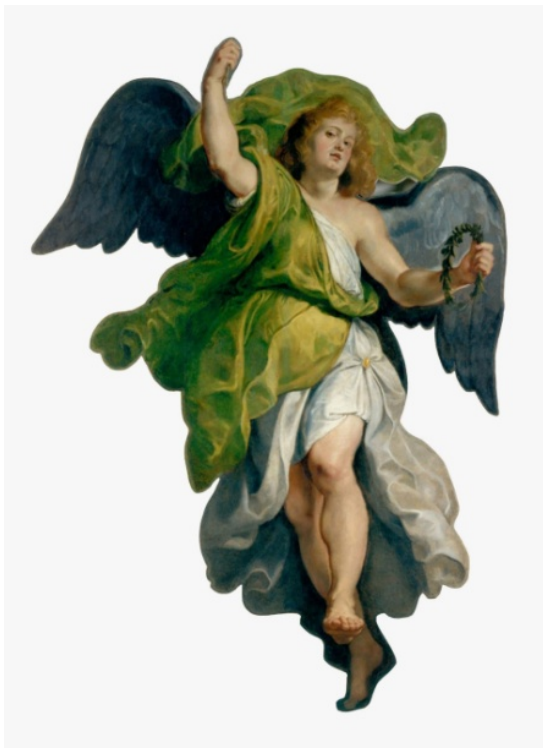

FIG 18 Peter Paul Rubens. Angel (1610-11) Flint Institute of Arts.

FIG 17 Anonymous Florentine Artist. Le trombe, (Judgment in tarot) Card. XL from the Florentine Minchiate (1791). HUAM. The text "FAMA VOLAT" translates from Latin to "Fame Flies"

For example, in Durer's *Knight, Death, and Devil*, (FIG. 15). the death figure is depicted on horseback in a similar manner as the Death card in the Florentine Minchiate (FIG. 16). The

Judgment card (FIG. 17) is stylistically similar to Ruben's *Angel* (FIG. 18). And Botticelli's *Venus* shares similarities with the Chariot card (FIG. 19-20).

The word "minichiate" comes from Italian dialect. It is a term meaning nonsense or trifle (Collins Italian-English Dictionary). The word "minichione" means Fool, and "minchionare" means to laugh at someone. The intention of the name of the game may be "The Game of the Fool," which is especially plausible considering that the Fool card is featured prominently among cards in Europe and is often associated with the player him or herself. In Sebastian Brant's 1494 German satirical allegory *Ship of Fools,* the prologue exclaims that the text is a mirror that allows readers to see the fool in themselves and everyone around them (Pinson). Historically, there is a shift at the end of the 15th century away from the idea of the Jester Fool with a cap and scepter, to a more social figure synonymous with the reader (FIG. 21) (Noble). The fool in the Florentine Minchiate is represented in this way. Other notable artworks illustrate relatable, fool-like figures paired with mirrors like in the French Book of Hours (FIG. 22): it is possible that all of these images allude to Brant's *Ship of Fools.* The Fool is not considered one of the trump cards because it is card zero. Resting in the middle of the number system, it is neither positive nor negative and can be associated with the ability to move forward or backward; this figure is Folly.

The idea of the Fool's Journey was not something invented for card usage, it can be seen in literature and religious sermons as well as art. For example, Hieronymous Bosch's *The Cutting Stone* (FIG. 23), shows skull fragments being extracted from a fool's head in an attempt to cure his folly. Also notable are publications such as In *Praise of Folly (Stultitiae Lus or Moriae Encomium),* an essay first printed in 1511 by Desiderius Erasmus of the Netherlands. It is worth noting that Erasmus' text is derived from an earlier work of the Italian humanist Faustino Perisauli (*De Triumpho Stultitiae*). *In Praise of Folly* is a satirical attack on the Catholic Church, and it focuses on themes of foolishness and self-righteousness. Even the title, *Moriae Encomium,* had a double meaning as "In Praise of More" refers to the main character Folly who endlessly praises herself (Wesseling). *In Praise of Folly* is considered one of the most notable works of the Renaissance and played an important role in the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation which followed in 1517.

FIG 19 Anonymous Florentine Artist. Il Carro, (the Chariot in tarot) Card X from the Florentine Minchiate (1791). HUAM.
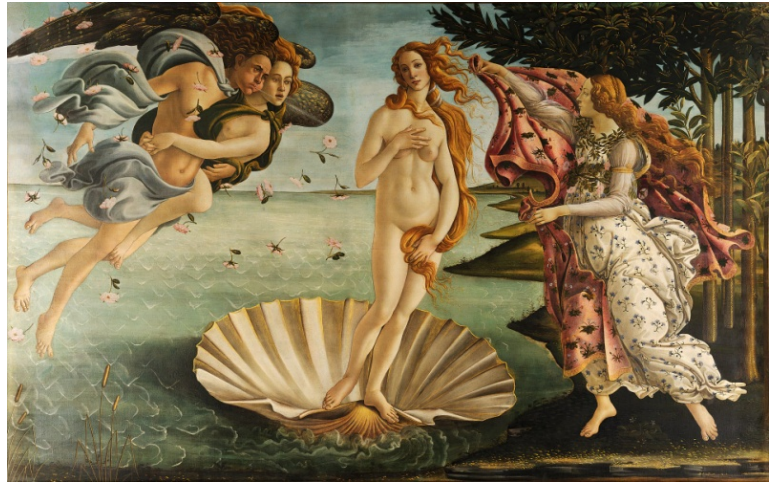

FIG 20 Botticelli. The Birth of Venus (1484–1486) Uffizi Gallery.

It is not farfetched that a deck of cards mainly meant for play might be connected to literary and religious sermons of this period. In fact, many other decks across Europe expressed political views, humor, quotes, and lyrics. James I of England (1603-1625) described the nature and benefits of cards rather well: "As for sitting, or human pastimes-since they may at times supply the room which, being empty, would be patent to pernicious idleness—I will not therefore agree with the curiosity of some learned men of our age in forbidding cards, dice and such like games of hazard; when it is foul and stormy weather, then I say, may ye lawfully play at the cards or tables; and as for the chess, I think it over-fond because it is over wise and a philosophic folly" (Kendall).

FIG 21 Anonymous Florentine Artist. Il matto. (The Fool in tarot) from the Florentine Minchiate (1791). HUAM.

FIG 22 Young man and death from Book of Hours/Life of St Margaret (1490) Bibliothèque Mazarine

**FIG 23 Hieronymus Bosch. The Cutting Stone
(The Extraction of the Stone of Madness or The
Cure of Folly) (1494) Museo Nacional Del Prado**

In conclusion, cards reflected a broad spectrum of society, and they expressed interesting social and cultural dichotomies for their respective audiences and historical periods. Cards were held in the hands of both the rich and the poor. Cards could represent masterful craft and, in some cases, demonstrate parallels with high art. Cards were also synonymous with gambling and poverty; they were mass-manufactured, at times illegal, and could be commissioned for outrageous sums of money by masters of high and low art together.

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