

## **R E V I E W**

from

**Prof. Buyan Yordanov Filchev, PhD**

for the defence of the doctoral dissertation of

**Ivaylo Emil Saraliyski**

PhD student in the self-preparation doctoral program, expelled with the right to defend in doctoral "Visual and Plastic Arts" at the Department of Fine Arts, NBU, professional field 8.2.Fine Arts, scientific specialty "Visual and Plastic Arts" for the acquisition of educational and scientific degree "PhD".

Thesis topic:

**"THE SYMBOLS IN TAROT CARDS AND  
THEIR TRANSFORMATION  
IN CONTEMPORARY ART"**

Scientific supervisor:

**assoc. prof. Kalina Hristova, PhD**

### **Scope and Structure of the Dissertation**

The dissertation contains: introduction, three chapters, conclusion, bibliography, appendices, scientific contributions with a total volume of 498 pages, included a total of 653 images supporting the theoretical study.

### **Relevance and importance of the research problem**

The topicality of the subject stems from the lack of scientific in-depth research, devoted to the Tarot, as most authors categorize the subject as non-dissertable, and the Tarot cards as part of mass culture accompanied by far from scientific interpretations in their use. Also topical is the approach to creating Tarot cards using a new toolkit linked to the use of artificial intelligence.

**The object and subject** of the study are clearly formulated.

### **Objective of the study**

The overall aim of this study is to contribute to the formation of a comprehensive cultural history of the Tarot, to explore the visual changes the deck has undergone over the centuries and trace the symbolism in its imagery.

The specific aim of the work is to compare key, for the development of Tarot, decks and to create an author's deck inspired by the rich toolbox of the XXI century.

**The tasks are:**

- to trace the true origins of the Tarot deck from the most remote possible records of them in time and, reaching back to the New Age
- to make a complete analysis of the meaning, symbolism, semiotics and iconography of the Tarot, through a detailed study of the iconography and transformation of the Major Arcana and Minor Arcana;
- to clarify the regulations when using artificial intelligence to generate images in order to create Tarot cards.

The thesis of the dissertation is that the apparent relationship of Tarot and fine art is not the result of a straightforward evolution, but a much more complex series of transformations and adaptations, building in an even more complex and diverse interrelationship with the development of the socio-cultural environment and its metamorphoses over time. It is in this context that a comparative analysis of the diverse decks of Tarot cards created and used over the centuries is offered for the first time in this country.

**Methods:**

- *Historiographic and retrospective;*
- *Informative-analytical.*

The **methodology** used by the dissertant is appropriate and appropriately applied to the matter under study, as it has a complex, peculiar documentary character.

The **originality** of the work is guaranteed because this is the first study in Bulgaria on the evolution of Tarot cards and their transformation into contemporary art, and also the first in Bulgaria decks created in collaboration with artificial intelligence created by the author of the dissertation.

The **thesis abstract** was prepared according to the rules and requirements set out in the regulations of the University of Higher Education. It contains all sections of the dissertation and the necessary information is presented concisely, clearly and correctly.

The dissertation contains scientifically applied results that represent an original contribution to the field of its focus. It demonstrates that the candidate possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge of the relevant specialty and the capacity for independent research, as well as creative potential.

From a linguistic point of view, the thesis is well written and full of quotations from notable personalities. The linguistic and stylistic unity testify to a clear authorial text, sufficiently concentrated and saturated with information, but also readable.

**It may be noted that each of the chapters could develop and be the subject of an independent study.**

**In chapter one** the emphasis is on the origins of the Tarot, because only in this way would we fully understand the original meaning of the symbolism in the cards. The chapter contains seven subchapters. In the first subchapter many different theories are considered, but through a long process of elimination the most convincing conclusions are reached. This leads to the way in which Tarot cards appeared on the European scene in the fifteenth century. Yet the understanding remains that this was an older process, but unfortunately the necessary documentation for this claim is lacking.

Extensive research follows and relates to the identity of the creator of the Tarot, but according to the author this is still not essential to the study.

The Italian Renaissance, and in particular the role of the Visconti-Sforza family in the context of the development of symbolism in decks, are clearly indicated, with the rules of the game being discussed for the first time. And here the dissertation skillfully and engagingly introduces us to a long-gone world, about which information is rather scarce and fragmentary, so that we can understand the genesis of the development of Tarot through the eyes of a fifteenth-century man.

**Nineteenth-century France** created a particular climate favourable to the development and increasing spread of the Tarot. The relationship between the increasing penetration of exotic religions from the East, esoteric influences, Egyptian knowledge, Hebrew letters and astrological signs and their influence in the creation of the Tarot is well understood. The movement of the deck from Milan through Ferrara and Bologna, France, Switzerland and Germany is traced. Over time the deck acquired a characteristic order - with a different final trump and a sequence of cardinal virtues. The "Marseille Tarot" became the most common deck during the early 18th century. The works of Emanuel Swedenborg, Albertus Magnus, Henri de Montfaucon de Villard, and Count de Gabalis, in tandem with Romanticism and Symbolism, traced the path to the occult.

What follows is a very detailed account of the influence of occult psychology and the creation of an occult Tarot by Antoine Court de Gebelin wholly focused on the esoteric currents of Rosicrucianism, Hermeticism, Kabbalism, Swedenborgianism and esoteric Freemasonry. The situation in which the potential of the Tarot as a divination tool develops is clarified here.

**Across the Channel to England** is the subject of the sixth sub-chapter, which comprehensively reveals to us the complex path of the Tarot's transformations, in an uncompromisingly definite direction, full of unfailing consistency.

And it is traversed by increasingly profound schemes and systems associated with various occult philosophies. As landmarks are marked the names of people who played a significant role in the development of the Tarot in this very direction, such as Eliphas Levi, whose magical system organically links Kabbalah and the Tarot. Also marked is Tarot's relationship to the "Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn" and later to the "Outer Order of Independent and Corrected Ritual" with its "Inner Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross". All of these developments, in seeking to facilitate divination, show unequivocally the evolution of the Tarot from a game to an esoteric system. Similar processes and trends were adapted in American culture in the 18th century.

*New Age „...is a heady blend of East and West, where Buddhist tantra collides with Indian shamanism, crystal healing and past-life regressions. ...This chapter examines how Tarot developed in this context“.*

At this stage of the Tarot's development, we see a significant enrichment of the symbol set. Artists experimented boldly and created decks with a function different from divination. In Appendix I the author shows these trends clearly enough.

**Chapter Two** provides a complete analysis of the meaning, symbolism, semiotics, and iconography of the Tarot through a detailed study of the iconography and transformation of the Major Arcana and Minor Arcana.

This chapter is very comprehensive in terms of elucidating the meaning, symbolism, identification of images and objects in a way that serves the text with a high degree of familiarity with the problem and skillful handling of the literature used. The necessary correctness in citing a representative number of authors is present.

This part of the dissertation is the largest, in terms of length, but there is nothing superfluous and it introduces us to the collage and all the important elements within it with a great understanding of this complex subject.

**In Chapter Three**, the focus is on Tarot generated by artificial intelligence. The PhD student comments on the current situation in terms of the increasing penetration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the art world, more specifically the use of (AI) in image generation through the MidJourney platform and the new *Remix Mode*. Here he clarifies that it is not about creating Tarot using guiding sentences and phrases. The concept proposed in this thesis is about symbiosis.

The cycle "*LET THERE BE*", created by Ivaylo Saraliyski, includes the decks: *LET THERE BE LIGHT*; *LET THERE BE COLOR* and *LET THERE BE FORM*.

The *LET THERE BE LIGHT* column is dedicated to light. The artist synthetically and clearly reveals his concept, clarifying the role and function of the white line and the black background.

*LET THERE BE COLOR*, created later, was inspired mostly by the explosion of colour and style, the development of 80s pop culture of the 20th century.

*The LET THERE BE FORM* collage was inspired by form and the development of AI. The images thus generated follow the iconography of the Tarot cards from the previous two decks. A new two-dimensional image is thus created from line and color, creating the illusion of space.

Detailed descriptions of the symbolism and the author's approach to creating all the cards from 0 to XXI follow, with the compositions alternating between full-length figures, half-figures, close-ups, and landscapes. The only card lacking composition is Death.

With these works Ivaylo Saraliyski clearly defends his thesis about the obvious connection of Tarot and fine art and their transformation into contemporary art with the help of AI.

**The appendix** contains 653 figures with texts in English. The attached List of Figures is therefore very important and provides much more detailed information.

Here is the place to emphasize the personal contribution of the doctoral student in the retrieval and selection of specimens from different approaches over time related to the stylistic features and design of the Tarot.

**The conclusion** contains conclusions on the dissertation, the reading of which confirms the main aims and objectives. The comparative analyses and evaluations of the dissertation results are a ready scientific basis for further research. The doctoral candidate has argued for the term "transformation" instead of "linear progression" as more applicable to the process that leads to the emergence over time of a vast amount of Tarot decks. It is the Tarot's capacity for transformation and adaptation that allows it to respond appropriately and relevantly to any changes and attitudes in society. The author states the fact that Tarot cards have today become a whole industry and artists from almost all fields of fine art are actively working in this direction. Digitization in this process is in full swing and this is a new opportunity for different and unknown ways of creative work to emerge in general and in fine art in particular.

**Scientific publications.** There are 4 scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation.

## **Scientific contributions of the dissertation**

The dissertation defines *scientific and applied contributions* with which I fully agree. They are cited both in the thesis itself and in the abstract and I have no comments to make on them because they accurately reflect the work done.

1. This work is the first study in Bulgaria on the evolution of Tarot cards and their transformation into modern art.
2. The main thesis is proven: the inextricable link between Tarot and art through the ages. The thesis of the evolution of Tarot as a series of transformations and adaptations following the development of the socio-cultural environment is justified. Within this thesis, a comparative analysis of the different decks of Tarot cards appearing over the centuries is proposed for the first time in Bulgarian literature.
3. A multidisciplinary approach is justified and used, drawing on historical, cultural, sociological and other sciences, as well as on appropriate elements of Carl Jung's psychoanalysis.
4. An original contribution is described in the work and the creation of an author's deck of Tarot cards inspired by the rich artistic and technical tools of the XXI century. An author's cycle LET THERE BE was created, containing three Tarot decks: *LET THERE BE LIGHT*; *LET THERE BE COLOR* and *LET THERE BE FORM*. These are the first decks in Bulgaria created in collaboration with artificial intelligence. Thus, this dissertation proves for the first time the possibility of Tarot development with the help of artificial intelligence and digital technologies. On this basis, future scientific and applied developments can be expected.

## **Recommendations**

1. Personally, I would have preferred the contents of chapter three to be separated into a separate appendix in its entirety, since the work on these three Tarot decks is the main and original contribution of the present work. Structuring the appendix as a design for possible autonomous use would create more comfort for the viewer.
2. Despite the very well done comparative analysis of the different decks of Tarot cards appearing over the centuries, it would have been useful in places for the author to comment on the quality of the images from the point of view of an artist, and in the context of the criteria of high artistic taste and masterly execution of the given era.

## Bibliography

The bibliography lists 30 titles and sources, but it is clear from the text of the dissertation that the doctoral student has used information based on other sources.

**In conclusion**, it can be said that Ivaylo Saralyski's dissertation demonstrates a sufficiently deep knowledge of the complex matter of Tarot cards. Among the many quotations and information provided from many sources at all stages of the work, one can see the personal attitude and clear position of the doctoral candidate.

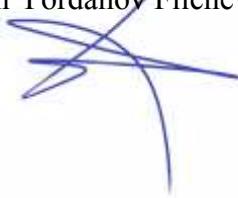
On the basis of all the above, I believe that the dissertation submitted for review fully meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and I strongly give it an **overall positive evaluation**.

I propose the distinguished members of the scientific jury to give their consent for the award of the degree of Doctor of Education and Science to Ivaylo Emil Saraliyski in cipher 8.2 "Fine Arts", scientific specialty "Visual and Plastic Arts".

Prof. Buyan Yordanov Filchev, PhD

01. 11. 2023

Sofia

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "Buyan Yordanov Filchev".