

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

ARCANE MYSTICISM

A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in Art,
Visual Arts

By

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May 2013

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DEDICATION

For everyone who has ever encouraged me to draw, create, expand my knowledge and mostly just do what I love.

Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

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My current body of work recreates the tarot deck in altering its outdated image with contemporary representation through digital means. Tarot is a very symbolic and transcendental practice that can bring interest to anyone – nonbelievers and believers alike. Tarot meaning and symbolism can be interpreted in many different ways. My intention when choosing the imagery for my deck is to interpret Tarot as a social critique of modern times. For example, *The Hermit* is represented as a homeless man; *The Hangman* as a bungee jumper; *Justice* as a young girl with eyes covered by her hair. My work is composed primarily of linear elements, flat colors – with the exception of some minor rendering – and a subtle addition of texture with a focus on portraiture and the human body. The compositions are organized with attention to detail, obsessive line work with hair, and a decisive, minimal palette. Divination is the quest to understand more about the past, present and future and in my process of recreating the Tarot deck, it has manifested into discovering more about myself as a person, an artist and a storyteller.

INTRODUCTION

Our era is chalk full of inventive variables that constantly look for something new and fresh. Although, one must never forget that no matter how much an artist moves forward, everything is influenced by history and it is impossible to make work that exists in a contemporary bubble. There is never a wrong or right approach to creating art; and even when there are contemporary artists like Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Alexa Meade who mimic certain styles of classical art, it is still commendable work. The Occult for instance, has been a present factor in most artwork for many centuries and has continuously been recycled throughout the years with a need for new perspective. In taking the idea of the old and creating something new, I have begun my own journey of producing Tarot cards.

A PRACTICE OF RECREATION

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by [them], but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language" ^[2]. No matter how often we look forward, there is always a tendency to look back; either for a learning experience, a need for inspiration, or just an exploration of style and technique. However, one figure in history was never too keen in following social standards and actually rebelled against it. "[William Hogarth] was a painter who, with as little aid from foreign influences as from those of the past, went his own way and kept to it, and devoted his art, unblemished by the pallor of a borrowed ideal of beauty, soberly and exclusively to the realities of surrounding life" ^[3]. He argued against wanting to be influenced by the artistic greats of the past for everything he created. He ridiculed and ignored the works of Italian masters such as Raphael and protested "against all the idealism which was the heritage of the Renaissance" ^[3]. Coincidentally, there are postmodernists who look to the masters as motivation for their next work such as with Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman and Alexa Meade. Sherrie Levine took Walker Evans's photographs of his son, Neil, and posed him as a classical Greek torso sculpture one might see in a museum ^[1] (figure 1.1). Perhaps it was to mock the simplicity of duplication and how most Greek sculptures look the same, but nonetheless, it was intentionally created to mimic that of a classical entity (figure 1.2). Cindy Sherman is another case that uses photography to reproduce classical paintings with real

human figures that are made up to look eerily like the painting. She always uses herself as a model posing as European portrait paintings of the fifteenth through early nineteenth centuries, and copying such works as Raphael's *La Fornarina* (figure 2.1) and Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus* (figure 2.2). Alexa Meade is an up-and-coming artist from Washington D.C. who paints people to look like they're in paintings (3.1). Her rough style reminds the viewer of the Impressionistic style (particularly Manet) that depicts everyday people, objects and scenery with crude palette knife strokes and thick slabs of paint. "The person is characterized not only by *what* he does, but also *how* he does it" ^[2]. Though these artists have copied a particular style from the classics, it is still beautifully done and much admired for "the object of art, as well as any other product, creates an artistic and beauty-enjoying public. Production thus produces not only an object for the individual, but also an individual for the object" ^[2]. The study of the Occult can easily fall under this idea of creating beauty for the public despite its more macabre, historical background.

HISTORY OF OCCULTISM

Occultism, the supernatural and anything out of the ordinary is medieval in theory because it is looked at strangely. It's a superstitious belief that few follow because of how little of it one sees. "For most art historians, turn-of-the-century mysticism, occultism, and anarchism have been considered too irrational and chaotic to be viewed as serious influences on modern artists. Reports of spiritism and séances led to much distrust of occultists, and the terrorist acts of some anarchists brought disapproval to anarchism as well. In addition, the frequency with which various occultists and anarchists moved from one group to another, or formed factions within a larger group, lent itself to much confusion over their activities and programs" ^[4]. However, it is far more controlled and does not make itself as well known as other forms of beliefs. Even in the art world, the use of Occultism translated into a visual wonder is actually very popular. Modern painter, Wassily Kandinsky, "was familiar not only with occultism, particularly Theosophy, but also with contemporary thought on socialism and anarchism in both Germany and Russia" ^[4]. The emphasis that Kandinsky liked most about anarchist and occult groups was the "opposing traditional conventions to create an appropriate climate for change [that] also gave support to Kandinsky's search for a new way to 'shock' his audience out of lethargy into involvement [and] to prepare them for the struggle for the great utopia" ^[4]. Kandinsky's approach to the Occult is not the only interesting aspect of this specific following. The study of tarot cards is but one facet that is tied in with the Occult.

HISTORY OF TAROT

Between the fifteenth century - in Northern Italy within regions of either Milan or Bologna when the Tarot was created - and the present, some have attempted to explain its mysteries with fanciful theories and speculative history. Starting in the eighteenth century, Western occultists claimed that the Tarot originated as a spiritual text in ancient Egypt and that it was spread throughout Europe by Gypsies ^[5]. The Tarot deck is primarily used for divination practices in attempting to tell one's future. However, before it became a phenomenon, its primary use was for entertainment purposes, serving as a card game ^[5]. It consists of two separate parts of which one is called the Major Arcana (or also known as the Trump Cards that hold 22 cards total) and the Minor Arcana (suit symbols divided up into a stack for wands, swords, pentacles and cups). The Major Arcana deck is full of symbolism and usually regards matters of higher importance or profound significance to the person while the Minor Arcana relates more towards everyday distinctions. The original deck was hand-drawn and painted and eventually was made using woodblocks or metal plates for most of the line work and painted by hand through a stencil ^[5]. It seems tedious in the fashion of how such things came to be considering the technology we have today and how quickly a deck of cards can be made. Perhaps because of the effort, detailing and prompt belief system that went along with the making of Tarot, people were more willing to trust that their fate lay within the cards. As a young adult who has always had a fondness for the Occult and all things ghoulish, I've delved deeply into a cryptic realm of artistic freedom in wanting to create my own Tarot deck.

PROCESS OF WORK

By taking the idea of turning the old into something new, I've used my skills of modern know-how to my advantage. Considering how old theories of the occult are, my take on the subject is very postmodern, graphic, detailed, and best of all, completely digitized. I work directly on the computer with a 9 x 12 inch Wacom Intuos 3 tablet and swap between Adobe Photoshop 7.0 and Paint Tool Sai in rendering my line work and color palette. Some painterly realism takes place within the eyes and lips and other minor accessories, but it never exceeds this limit as I keep the image contained to flat, minimal colors. Most of the chosen characters for each Tarot have been fleshed out to look like everyday people that can seem relatable in certain circumstances depending on what's understood about the card it portrays. This is where research plays a huge part in my work; I take what I know from the real world and fuse it with what I've learned about Tarot and in its wake, create a unique hybrid that encompasses the intended idea. The Major Arcana has been my main focus of completion during my graduate studies at CSUN.

Justice (figure 4.1) is a favored piece that is borderline cliché, yet takes a whole new approach to the original Tarot card. With arms folded, the girl I've chosen to represent as *Justice* is very reserved and indifferent and she is blinded with her hair swept over her eyes (figure 4.2). In a sense, I've taken the infamous quote "justice is blind" and turned it into a more literal understanding with this piece. As with some of my other cards, I've incorporated collage into the background, but kept it faded and subtle so that the main focus is still on the character. I work very simply in design and use of color except when it comes to rendering the hair with obsessive line work; *Justice* is not exempt from that repetitive stylization.

The Hermit (figure 5.1) usually embodies a cloaked, old man wandering around in search of something. In my representation, I remain true to the nature of this specific Tarot, but add my

own twist. My *Hermit* is an elderly man who appears wise and in deep thought; however, he is viewed as homeless with his ragged exterior, unkempt hair and a brown suit that could have been fished out from the trash. The dried, yellow carnation has been said to symbolize disdain and rejection and in my own observations, not many ever admit to enjoying the company of homeless people (figure 5.2). They are looked down upon and seen as lesser beings just because they cannot afford a roof over their heads and are probably driven to insanity due to their misfortune. It's a misleading notion, but that is a commonplace representation. In a different approach, I carried my trend of obsessive line work towards the clothing as well as the hair and beard, adding more textural curves along the skin to showcase his age.

When one thinks of the Devil, they might envision a demonic presence with animal horns and a beastly visage that can terrify you to the core, but in reality, women can be just as fearsome. *The Devil* tarot (figure 6.1), originally, is portrayed as that very cliché visual, so I turned it around and cast the role to a female nude instead. Given the already devilish look about her, I've added several subtle readings into the piece such as her red hair, a smoky backdrop, the gliding serpent collaged behind the woman (Adam and Eve in relation to sin), scales of a snake fashioned around her torso and even gave the illusion of intertwined arms that never really connect (tricking the eye as *The Devil* has been known to be a fiendish joker) along with bent fingers that can be looked as claws. Every nuance is meant to give off the sensation of a demonic presence living inside this woman and looking out to the viewer, she hopes to draw them in with the sexualized allure she exudes (figure 6.2). That is *The Devil*. Temptation plays a *huge* role with the meaning of this tarot. The red hair specifically is actually considered one of many fetishes by today's standards. However, during the Middle Ages, red hair was seen as the color

of the Devil, and they were considered tricksters and witches and were put to death, so for my card, this character fit perfectly for the part.

The Lovers (figure 7.1) are another well-known piece that initially depicts Adam and Eve creating a union and being intimate (among other descriptions). In my interpretation, I remained true to the bond of a man and a woman with a passionate scenario of half-naked bodies covered with red sheets (color most used to depict passion). The woman's back is to the viewer, but her profile is engaged not only with the onlookers, but of the man beside her who is gently caressing her back (figure 7.2). In keeping with a modern approach, the woman's back is adorned with a cherry blossom tattoo that branches off her shoulder and crawls beneath the wrapped sheet around her hips. One symbol of the cherry blossom goes off on the idea of love and feminine beauty, yet it is also the type of flower that dies as quickly as it blooms and with that suggestion, love itself can be a fleeting sentiment. However, there is something rather immoral about the entire scene. I chose not to portray a loving couple, but rather, a dysfunctional one. Not all lovers are born out of storybooks with a happy ending. There is always something wrong with it and with this image, I created a narrative that could go either way be it the woman holding a secret against the man or the man doing the same to the woman or both are playing a wicked game of sorts outside their own relationship. Nevertheless, it still keeps to the original idea of the card: choosing between right and wrong and figuring out where you stand aside from notions of love on its own.

The back of the card is an essential element to the deck (figure 8.1). It is meant to be ambiguous and repetitive in structure so that the person receiving the reading will never know if the image is reversed or right side up (an imperative part of Tarot). Depending on how the card is seen, the reading varies upon meaning. Bearing in mind how rendering hair is a recurring theme

in my work, I drew out one section and flipped it around so that one side mirrored the other and created an almost optical illusion that keeps to the uncertainty of what Tarot stands for (figure 8.2). An overlay of texture is then added on top of the lines to give it an aged appearance.

A deck of cards always has a cohesive bond that connects them all together so that it reads in a fluid transition when viewing one piece after another. In tackling this problem, I produced a frame template that I use for each completed image (figure 9.1). A thin, maroon border surrounds a blue, rectangular box and encompassing that, a subtle vignette touches along the corners to give the artwork a bit more depth. Towards the bottom, I've drawn a classic style banner that folds out horizontally and has an old, tattered feel to it. There is a distinct clash between retro and modern features with the template and that was purely intentional. I'm taking century's worth of archaic work and revamping it completely, but still maintaining the fundamental nature of Tarot. As with all my pieces, texture plays an important part. It is the final addition that binds the work and gives it more life and character with a vintage charm.

Lastly, I title each card with New Hampshire font (figure 10.1). It's the perfect Humanist Serif Face that doesn't come off perfect and mechanical despite the refined imagery it represents. Again, in choosing this typeface, it acts as another reading as it faintly curves within the banner and solidifies the entire card in stating the importance of what it is meant to be.

Though drawn digitally, the end result is tangible. In addition to the conventional route of creating a personalized tarot deck, I've stepped outside the box and also made giant cards - 13 x19 inch in size with rounded corners, showing both the front and back designs that are glued together with the help of a dry mount press. In working with this medium, I have the benefit of printing to whatever size is needed. These proportions are not of particular importance other than its convenience of printing and mounting with the resources I have on hand.

More than just a picture, my work embodies symbolism in as many ways as possible. I try to incorporate the card's essence and main theme of the Tarot I am representing in a way that helps narrate the scene and hopefully move away from it being just an image with only surface detail and nothing more. Symbolism has always been a huge factor in artwork and though not always intentional, the artist's hand is ever-present and the way they work and integrate themselves within the piece may be subtle, but still very effective. With that in mind, I think of ways to tell a story using symbols either from personal experience or just including objects to create more readings and keep the viewers eye roaming and never lose interest. Tarot within its own spectrum hosts a wide array of symbolism in each card and it helps the reader understand more about what it is the deck is trying to tell them in terms of their present and future lives. Though a bit simpler, my interpretation of Tarot houses the same idea by using icons that modern society may be familiar with. Some of those ideas were already explained with a few of the cards I mentioned such as with cherry blossoms in *The Lovers*, the balance scale in *Justice* and the serpent in *The Devil*. These are all things many can relate to or at the very least, put some importance as to why I included them and form an opinion of their own. There is never a wrong answer in reading Tarot or symbolic imagery in general and that's the beauty of it.

CONCLUSION

History will always have a way of repeating itself regardless of how it comes about occurring in life. With art, it's innate to look to others for inspiration, be it past or present influences. Like most artists, I have found my niche in the way I choose to represent my work in a particular style that I can stand behind proudly. Throughout this entire process, I have come to notice that I'm incredibly obsessive in everything I do and there needs to be a specific purpose for whatever it is I've set my mind to, otherwise, it's back to the drawing board. It has become more than just a project. It feeds my curiosity with the occult, Tarot and the important use of symbolism. It develops my style and teaches me something new with every card I make. Most notably, it has created an ambitious goal to accomplish a feat I wish to achieve with a final product. In my journey to recreate the Tarot deck, I have discovered different uses of digital technique and storytelling with a simplistic design of line work and color palette that defines me as a person, an artist and a spectator of all things arcane and mystical.

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APPENDIX



Figure 1.1 - Sherrie Levine



Figure 1.2 - Greek statue



Figure 2.1 - Cindy Sherman & Raphael's *La Fornarina*



Figure 2.2 - Cindy Sherman & Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus*



Figure 3.1 - Alexa Meade



Figure 4.1 - Justice



Figure 4.2 - Justice (close up)

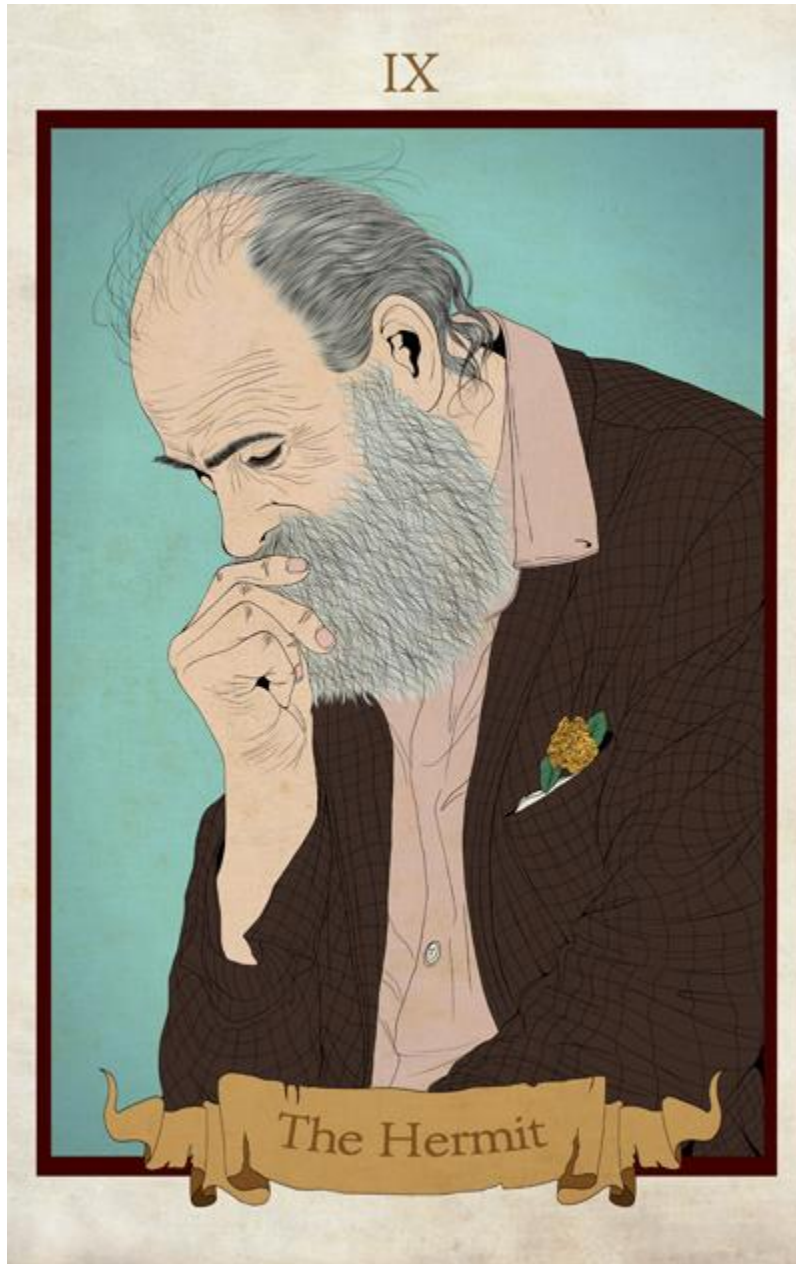


Figure 5.1 - *The Hermit*



Figure 5.2 - *The Hermit* (close up)



Figure 6.1 - *The Devil*



Figure 6.2 - *The Devil* (close up)



Figure 7.1 - *The Lovers*



Figure 7.2 - *The Lovers* (close up)

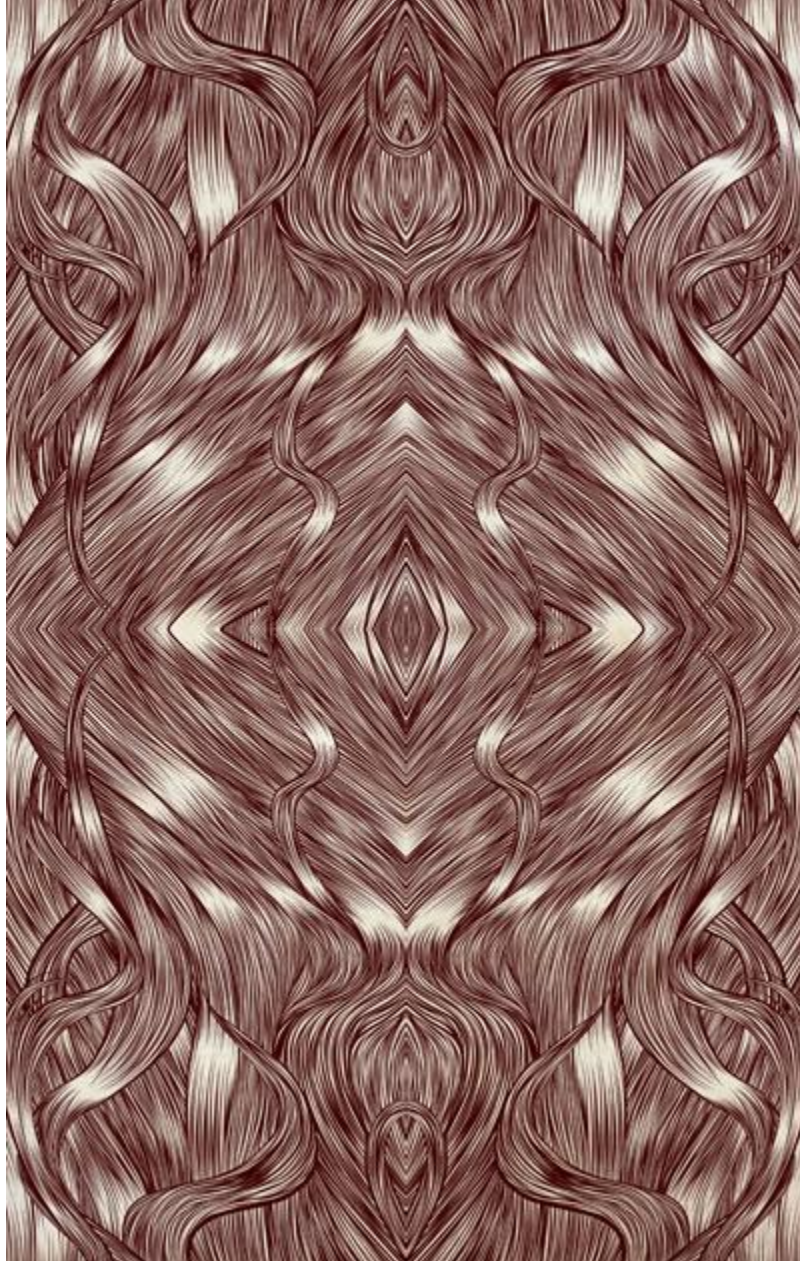


Figure 8.1 - *Card Design*

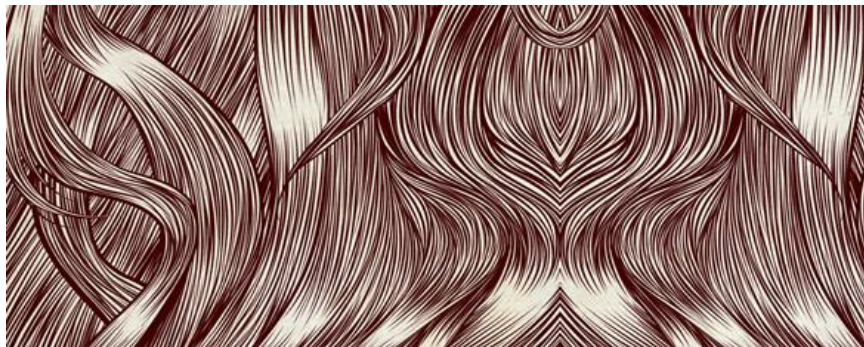


Figure 8.2 - close up

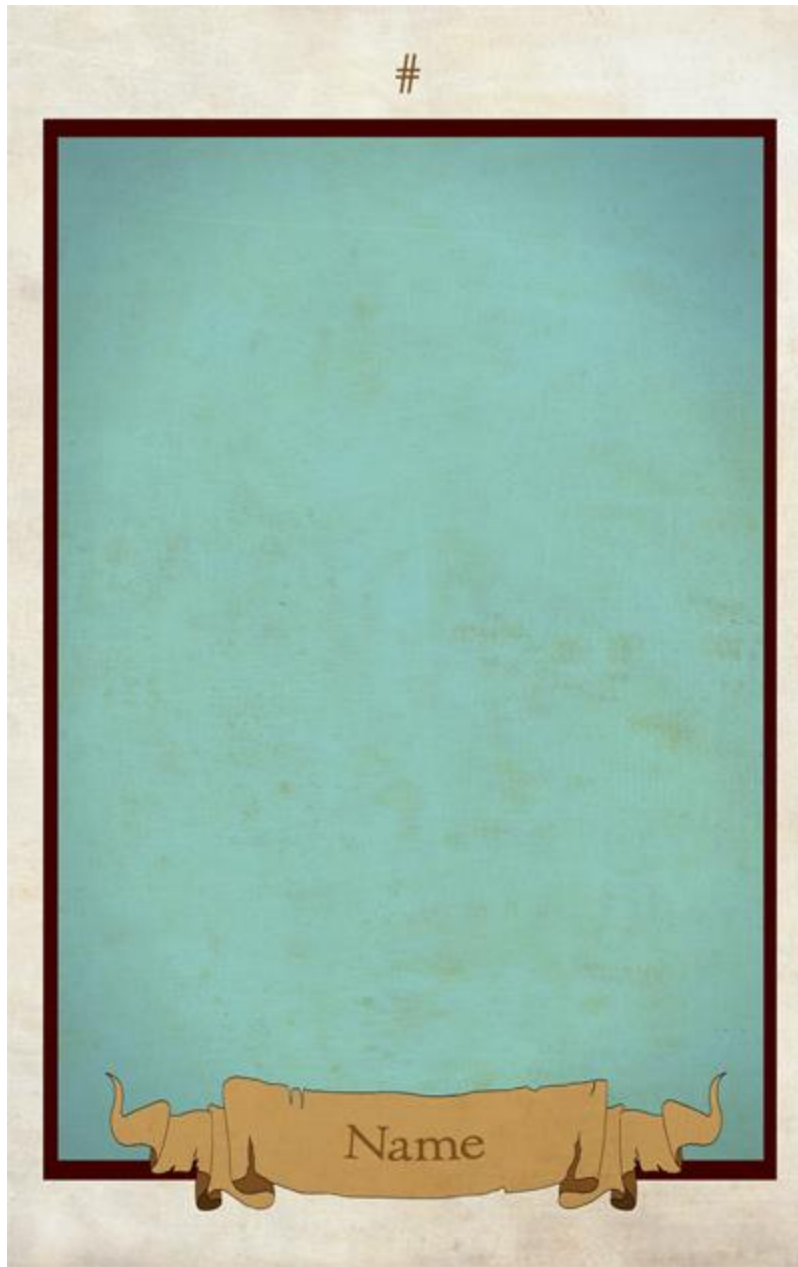


Figure 9.1 - Tarot Template



Figure 10.1 - *Tarot Script*