

The Witches Tarot Decks of Arnold Crowther and John Upton

by Melissa Seims

Following on from my last article in *The Wiccan*, I was intending to look at the various Books of Shadows of the late artist and witch, my friend John Upton. Apologies, but my attention was diverted by the muse behind John Upton's witches tarot deck, which started calling louder....¹

In the 1990s, John Upton set about creating a full set of tarot cards based upon Gardnerian Witchcraft. He was Initially inspired by the major arcana of the 'Witches Tarot' created by Arnold Crowther and featured in the 1974 book, *The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft with the Witches Tarot*.² by Patricia and Arnold Crowther. John clearly used Crowther's versions as the basis for his own major arcana, though he made some notable changes which we will look at later in this article. First, let's have a look at Arnold's deck, or rather 'decks'...

Arnold Crowther's 'Witches Tarot'

Chapter 9 of *The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft*, gives a few pages of information about Crowther's Witches Tarot followed by images of all 22 major arcana:

The following twenty-two major arcana cards were designed especially for use in the circle by Arnold Crowther, and are based upon witchcraft symbolism.

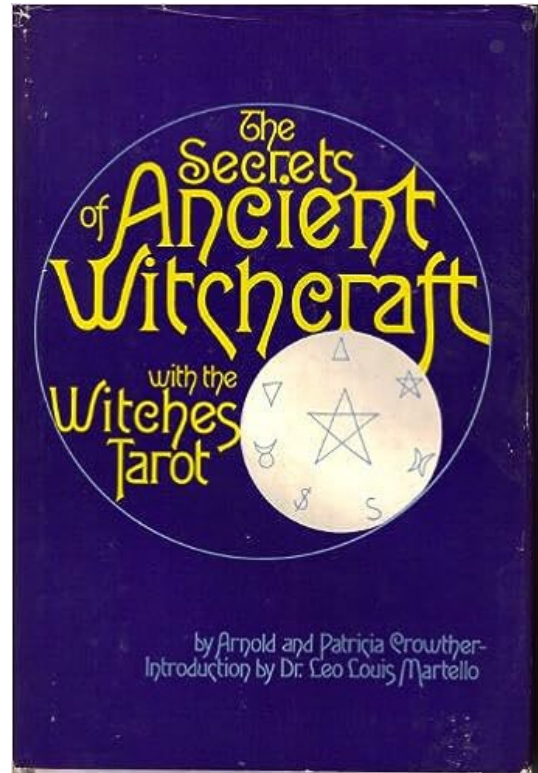
*Arnold originally made two packs which he painted by hand: one for the Sheffield coven, and the other for Doreen Valienti [sic], the Witch of Brighton.*³

The entire chapter on the Witches Tarot and the book's 'introduction', was written by the American witch and gay rights activist Dr. Leo Louis Martello. According to Wikipedia, in 1973 he came to live in the UK for 6 months and was taken through the three degrees by the Crowther's.⁴ However, as is commented in Wiki on some of his other claims: '*Martello never produced any proof to support his claims, and there is no independent evidence that corroborate them.*'⁵

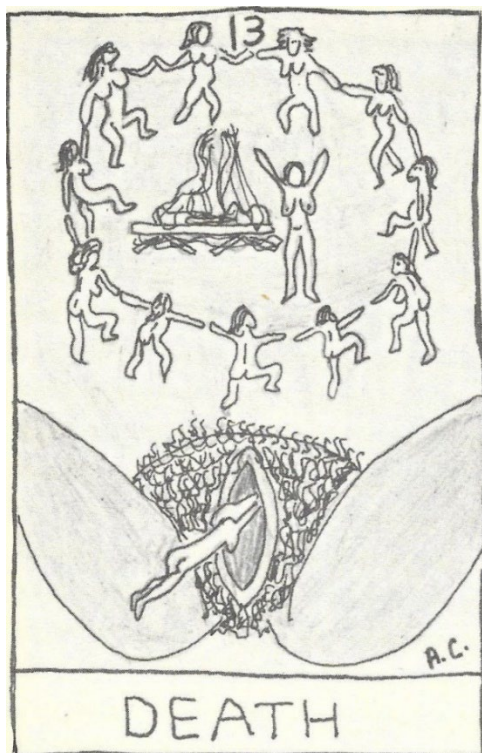
There are a few peculiarities in Martello's text. For example, of Crowther's 'Death' card, Martello writes:

*Unlike other decks in which Death is usually depicted as a skeleton dressed as a knight – the grim reaper – here, in card XIII it is shown as Cernunnos, the stag-antlered god of hunting, winter and the underworld.*⁶

However, the Death card shown in the book, is not an image of an antlered god but is instead of a giant vagina. It looks a bit like something out of Monty Python sketch or a scene from a certain 1972 Woody Allen film.⁷ You can be sure John Upton delighted in copying this particular one:



Cover of Crowther's 1974 book.



Arnold's Death card from the 1974 book.



John Upton's Death card

Other peculiarities are seen in the names of the cards that Martello uses in his text: He refers to the XXI trump card in Crowther's deck, as being called 'The Green Goddess' – but it is not; the card depicted still has its traditional name of 'The World'. Peculiarly, Crowther's own interpretive notes on the major arcana, given in their book, again refer to XXI as 'The Green Goddess'.

As a researcher and writer, I don't like discrepancies like this, so I dug a little further to see if I could explain them. I approached the Doreen Valiente Foundation (DVF) to ask if they were in possession of the set that Arnold Crowther gave to Doreen. Disappointingly, they told me they did not have such an artefact. However, these muses like to surprise me, and I was subsequently led to discover some old images of what I believe were the cards given to Doreen. This was then confirmed by Ashley Mortimer, former trustee of the DVF, as the set given to Doreen by Arnold. For the purposes of this article, I shall henceforth refer to these cards as the 'DVAC [Doreen Valiente - Arnold Crowther] Set'.

Just as in the book, there are 22 major arcana in the set. Clinchingly, in the DVAC set, just as Martello states in Crowther's book, Death is indeed an image of 'the stag-antlered god of hunting':



Arnold's Death card from the DVAC set.

Whilst that has cleared up that discrepancy, it should be noted that there is no 'Green Goddess' card in the DVAC set, so that issue remains. I wondered if perhaps a 'Green Goddess' card might exist in Crowther's other original set, still with Patricia Crowther in Sheffield. I have not seen the complete set; however, Ashley Mortimer has and informed me that no card bears the title of 'Green Goddess'. Perhaps it was a card which was only colloquially known as the 'Green Goddess'? It was a term that Arnold Crowther liked, and Part One of *The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft with the Witches Tarot*, written by Arnold, has the subtitle of 'The Green Goddess'.

Ashley was also able to confirm that Arnold's 'Sheffield' deck has a number of differences to the DVAC set; mostly ones that reflect the individual nature of the hand drawn images rather than their compositions, as with the Death card which features all the same elements of the DVAC Death card, but gives a different perspective:



Death card from Arnold Crowther's 'Sheffield' Witches Tarot.

To avoid brain-ache and to clarify - there were three different 'Witches Tarot' major arcana sets created by Arnold Crowther, with each card individually drawn by him: The coloured 'Sheffield' deck owned by Patricia Crowther, the coloured DVAC set (the cards Arnold gave to Doreen Valiente), and the published set depicted in black and white (though they look as if they too were likely coloured) in the Crowther's 1974 book.

Before turning to look at how Crowther's 'Witches Tarot' influenced the anarchist artist, John Upton's own Witches deck, let's first have a closer look at the fascinating DVAC cards.

All the cards are hand-drawn and hand-coloured. The red backs of the cards are illustrated with a simple black Algiz rune (rune of defence and protection). There are some minor, notable differences between the writing and the drawing styles seen in the DVAC and published Crowther deck, plus an 'AC' [Arnold Crowther] signature is only seen in the book version. I think Arnold likely took a conscious

approach to amending, redrawing and editing his 'Witches Tarot' specifically with view to its publication, which led to minor stylistic differences between the two sets.⁸

The imagery of the 22 cards in the DVAC set, are unquestionably of Crowther's creation. Many are near-identical in content to the ones published in their book, but a few are strikingly different.

One of the significant changes Arnold made, can be seen in the High Priest card where it immediately become understandable as to why the imagery was completely changed for its official publication. I particularly love the Pan-like shadow on the wall and the card certainly gives new meaning to the phrase a 'woman girt with a sword'!



High Priest - DVAC set

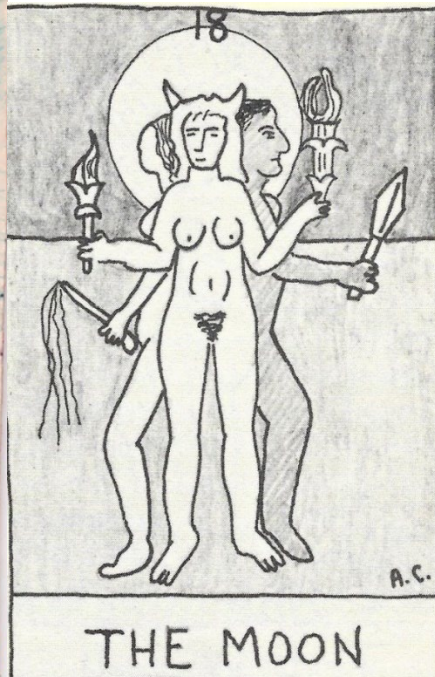
High Priest - Crowther's published version

That said, we can't really give the same reason about the replacement of our beloved Horned God with a giant Sheila-na-gig of a vagina as seen earlier in the Death card, so it seems there was more to Arnold's reasoning behind the changes he made.

My favourite card from the DVAC set is The Moon and is another card to which a significant change was made. I really like the portrayal of an unveiling of womanhood as opposed to the more commonly seen 'maiden mother and crone' - which Crowther did choose to depict in his published version of the card:



The Moon - DVAC Set



The Moon - published set

I also suspect that some of the women seen in the DVAC cards, are based on real-life Priestesses. The Sorceress (the title used instead of 'The Magician') looks like it could be Patricia Crowther and the Star, Doreen Valiente.



In *The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft with the Witches Tarot*, Martello further wrote:

Although not reproduced in this book, the Witches Tarot also has a Minor Arcana consisting of fifty-six cards, all designed with the same Witch symbolism and originality as the Major Arcana depicted here. The full deck will soon be available to the public. L.L.M.⁹

As far as I am aware, a complete version of Crowther's 'Witches Tarot' never made it to the public arena and I have never seen or come across any 'Witches Tarot' minor arcana, attributed to Arnold Crowther. We only have the 22 major cards printed in the book and only 22 cards are in the DVAC and Arnold's 'Sheffield' deck. Furthermore, Clive Harper, an initiate of the Crowther-line, only recalls seeing the major arcana at the Crowther's house.¹⁰ As such, I think it likely a minor arcana project was planned, but never materialised, most probably because on the 1st of May 1974, Arnold Crowther went beyond the veil - the same year the book was first published.

Enter John Upton and the completion of this task...

John Upton and the Tarot of the Ayrshire Witches

John Upton decided to complete the deck by drawing all of the minor arcana himself and continued with the Gardnerian and historical Witchcraft theme. Naming it the 'Tarot of the Ayrshire Witches' (TotAW), it is a black and white 78-card deck, in a raw and naive, 'art brut' style. For some reason, John drew two, seven of sword cards and there is also a 'cover card' with the name of the deck, so if you include those, in total, the TotAW has 80 cards.

After its creation, it became the Ayrshire coven's 'special' Tarot deck. We give black and white photocopies of it to our initiates and suggest they colour them in a way that is magical and meaningful to them. Charles Clark was a big tarot deck collector which made this feel especially apt to us. I love the concept of the passing-down of things like this through our Craft family. The threads of those who have gone beyond, reach through time and mingle with the threads of the new.

Let's now look at how the TotAW came into being and touch upon other, arty tarot and card decks that John Upton created. Finally, we will look in more detail at the major and minor arcana from John Upton's 'Tarot of the Ayrshire Witches':



Tarot of the Ayrshire Witches cover card

In February 1995, the 'Magazine for Mantric Arts', *Manteia*, featured an article entitled 'A standard Witches' Tarot pattern?'.¹¹ It showed several images from John's 'Tarot of the Ayrshire Witches'. Both the article and the magazine were put together by the Danish man K. Frank Jensen; a collector of tarot

decks and a noted author on such. The article records how John's complete TotAW, inspired by Crowther's major arcana, came into Jensen's possession.

In 1993, Jensen sent a request to mail artists for submissions under the theme of 'Mail Artist's Tarot'.^{12 13} Two years later, in 1995, John Upton sent the 'Tarot of the Ayrshire Witches' to Jensen who subsequently contacted John for more information leading to the writing of the *Manteia* article.

John mentioned to Jensen that:

During the years he [John Upton] himself has made several decks other than the Witches Tarot. Bill Butler speaks highly of one of them, a collage deck, in his book 'The Definitive Tarot' (Rider 1975).¹⁴

The entry John is referring to and the tarot in question was called 'The John Upton Deck' and are described by Butler, (who I wrote about in my last article in *The Wiccan*), as follows:

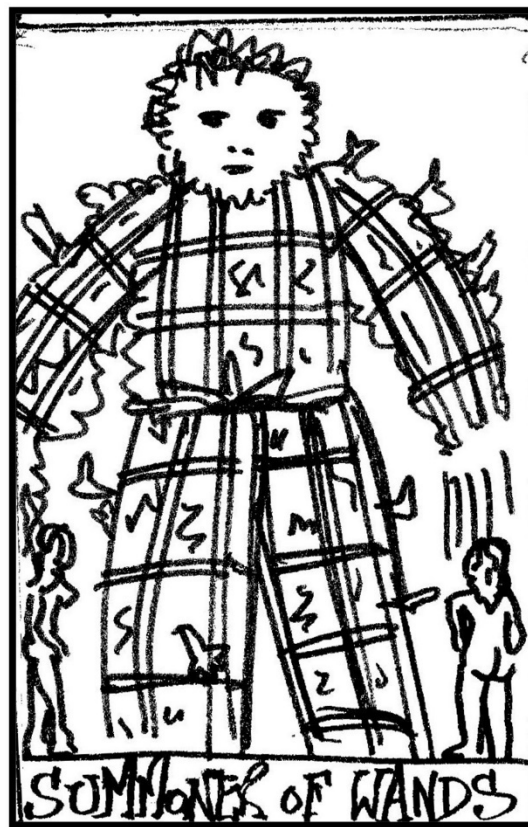
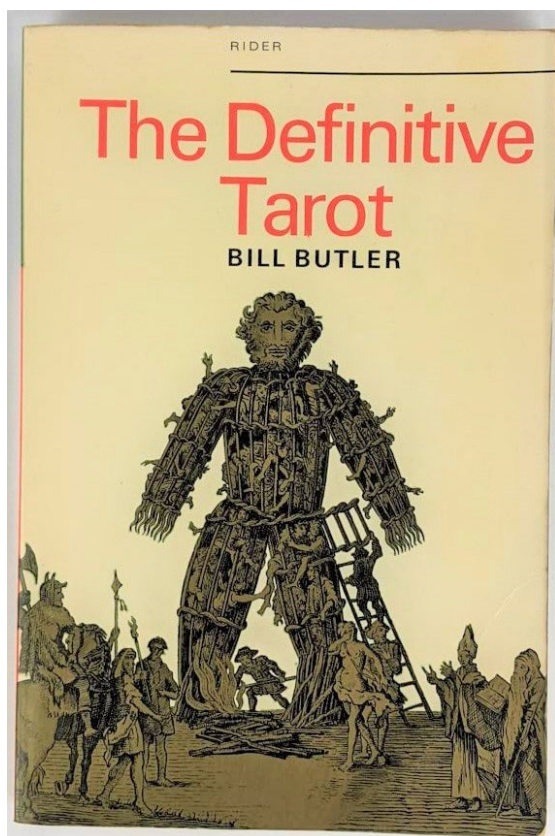
From a private collection. These cards consist of 22 Major Arcana in felt pen and collage, highly coloured, and 56 Minor Arcana in collage, primarily black and white. Material used includes pictures from comic books, advertisements for pornography, original drawings, engravings, war pictures, advertisements. Beautifully done.¹⁵

I do not have any images from the 'John Upton Deck' but they sound similar in style to a set he presented to me as a gift and which he called 'The Melissa Seims Cards'. Mine consist of witches, magic, and mystical creatures and similarly feature collage and brightly coloured felt pen. John Upton was trying to reflect my interests at that time, in the cards he named for me. In the same way, I strongly suspect that Butler's description of the 'John Upton Deck', likely captured something of the spirit of who John Upton thought he was in the 1960s and 70s.



A 'Melissa Seims' card

In his TotAW, John Upton used the same image of the 'Wicker Man', seen on the cover of the first edition of Butler's *The Definitive Tarot*, as his 'Summoner of Wands' card. I suspect as a tribute to the kind words of his openly gay friend, Bill Butler and perhaps one with an intentional 'double entendre' which would have had John chortling to himself.

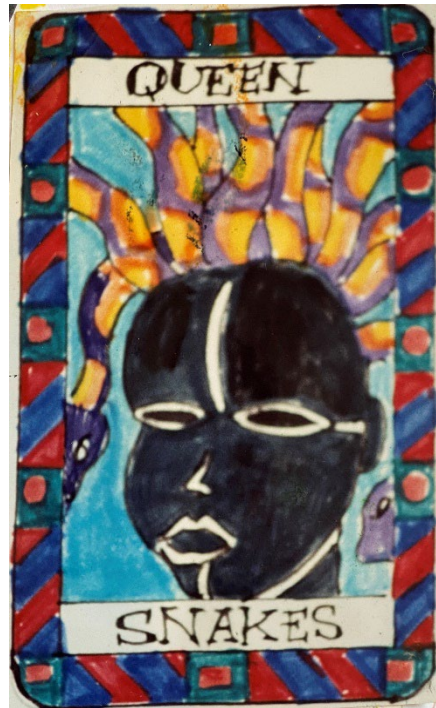


Of the TotAW, John further commented to Frank Jensen:

One peculiar thing is, that the cards, when drawn on a sheet, always are placed in a given order, which is not the numerical order, but rather an order relating to the cards importance.

Now I do not know anything of this special 'given order' and I think I can hear Upton's maniacal laughter ringing through the ether. I suspect this was a fabrication as by then, John had stuck his original tarot drawings onto A3 'master' sheets (I have these originals) and so couldn't really separate them out easily. It's certainly possible he invented this mystical-sounding explanation in order to explain his slightly idiosyncratic arrangement. That said, I am not particularly knowledgeable with tarot so If anyone knows otherwise, do let me know! The illustration given in *Manteia* shows 16 major arcana cards and their order commences with the trump cards of 2, 3, 4, 5, 1, 6, 19 and 20.¹⁶

John, along with his then-partner Iona, also designed an African art tarot deck which they sent to the tarot and playing card publisher U.S. Games (USGS) for consideration. They used a calabash, a type of gourd used as a drink receptacle, instead of a cup, spears instead of swords, snakes instead of wands and shields instead of pentacles. Then names of African Gods and Goddesses were also used such as Oshun – a Goddess of the rivers and seas. Jensen perceptively comments '*Hopefully it will not just end up in Kaplan's collection!*' Stuart Kaplan was the founder of US Games and as far as I am aware, the African art tarot deck was never printed. I only have a few of the images from it, one of which is the Queen of Snakes:



John created another set of cards based on the Talismans of the Sage of the Pyramids. The core images and words for these are given by A. E. Waite in his 1913 work, *The Book of Ceremonial Magic* and John has coloured them largely in accordance with the description Waite gives.

Coming now to Spring 2020, my eye was caught by an article in *The Enquiring Eye* – a journal produced by the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic at Boscastle in Cornwall. It featured a contribution by Simon Wood entitled 'The Witches' Tarot'.

Simon had gone on a mission after discovering Crowther's 'Witches Tarot' in their aforementioned book. This had led him to discover Jensen's interest and Upton's TotAW.

Through his research, Simon pieced together that John Upton knew Doreen Valiente. Given that Arnold Crowther had gifted a copy of the major arcana of the 'Witches Tarot' to Doreen, Simon very reasonably wondered if John Upton may have copied all of his deck, including the minor arcana, from Doreen Valientes's set. Sadly, this was not the case - it is now apparent that John was inspired by the major arcana of the Witches Tarot as shown in Crowther's book. Furthermore, as already mentioned, I have found no evidence that Crowther ever created a set of the minor arcana. John drew his own a couple of decades later thereby creating a complete Gardnerian Witchcraft themed tarot deck. It's a shame, as a lovely synchronistic and magical story loop would have been made if I could have confirmed Simon's reflections.

In his article, Simon gives us a bit more information about what K. Frank Jensen subsequently did with Upton's TotAW:

Frank Jensen decided to print a version and added the colour of an overall green and pink tone "since most coven rituals took place nude and out doors". He would later publish the cards in two batches of six, firstly in 1995 and again in 2011. Whether they were sold privately to friends and associates or to the general public I do not know. But they are rather scarce.¹⁷



Jensen's coloured, limited edition

About ten years ago, I was approached by a Tarot publisher who wanted to reproduce John Upton's TotAW. I declined the offer as I like keeping things in the family. There are a couple of online archives that feature a few of John Upton's TotAW, including Adam McLean's Tarot database on his Alchemy website.¹⁸ All of those images have come from Jensen's coloured and very limited edition of TotAW.¹⁹

Towards the end of his article, Simon writes:

What I really like about these is the concept; the fact that the cards are made personal by your own coven's practices. Even some of the characters on the cards look like coven members or tradition Elders, therefore giving a deeper connection to them and recording coven history.²⁰

Let's take a closer look at the cards:

TotAW -The Major Arcana.

The major arcana of the TotAW has some notable differences between Arnold Crowther's designs and John Upton's redrawing of them. It also decisively confirms that John was inspired by the published versions of Crowther's cards and had likely never seen Doreen's DVAC set.

In the main, John Upton has more strongly embraced the idea of the dynamic polar dance between the masculine and the feminine, the yin and yang. For example, in Crowther's 'Rebirth' card – tarot trump 20 and more commonly referred to as 'Judgement', there are two women. Upton's depicts a man and a woman. The people on Arnold's 'The Lovers' card, look like two women to me, it could be argued that one could be a long-haired man but the DVAC version confirms that it is two women. John's

version of The Lovers clearly depicts a man and a woman. In John's 'Death' card, the Coven in the background shows a mixture of men and women – Crowther's seem to be all women.

Similar examples of gender changes being made by Upton, can be seen in 'The Wheel'. This card depicts the torture of witches by the device known as The Breaking Wheel instead of the more benign image of a wheel seen in many other decks. Upton's version has a man and a woman on the wheel, Crowther's has just a woman. The DVAC version has two women being tortured and also uses the title 'The Wheel of Fortune' not 'The Wheel'.

These gender-changes are interesting examples that illustrate differing approaches and ideas about the Craft. Crowther's deck seems very much to be about the feminine and the High Priestess, whereas John chose to balance things better – these reflected John's own sexual preferences and more significantly, reflected the ideologies and approach of our initiator, Charles Clark, who placed a special emphasis on the concept of a dynamic dance between the 'working couple' with the High Priestess being 'first amongst equals'.

Arnold changed some of the traditional names of the Major Arcana. For example, you have 'Sacrifice' for 'The Hanged Man', 'The Sorceress' for 'The Magician', 'The Great Mother' for 'The Empress' and 'The Elder' for 'The Hermit'. Rather delightfully, the man on this last card, is Gerald Gardner. The coloured card is John's personal, hand-coloured copy. For these, he chose to use only the four elemental colours of green, blue, red and yellow.

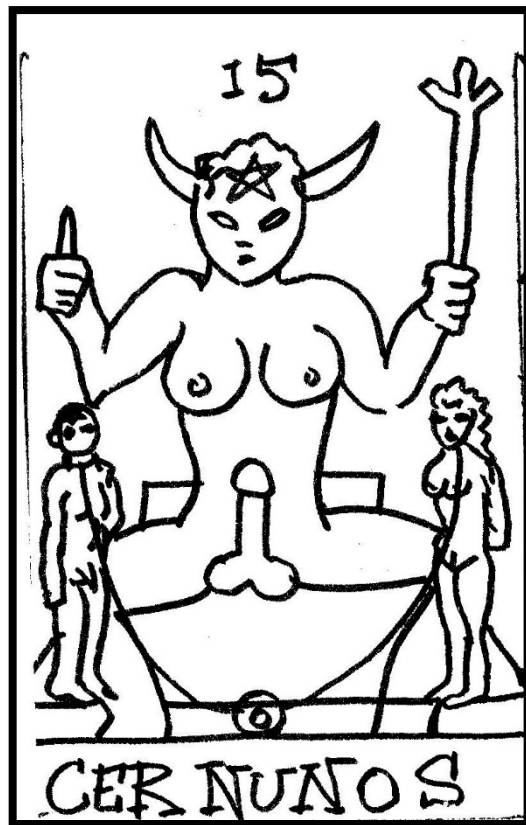
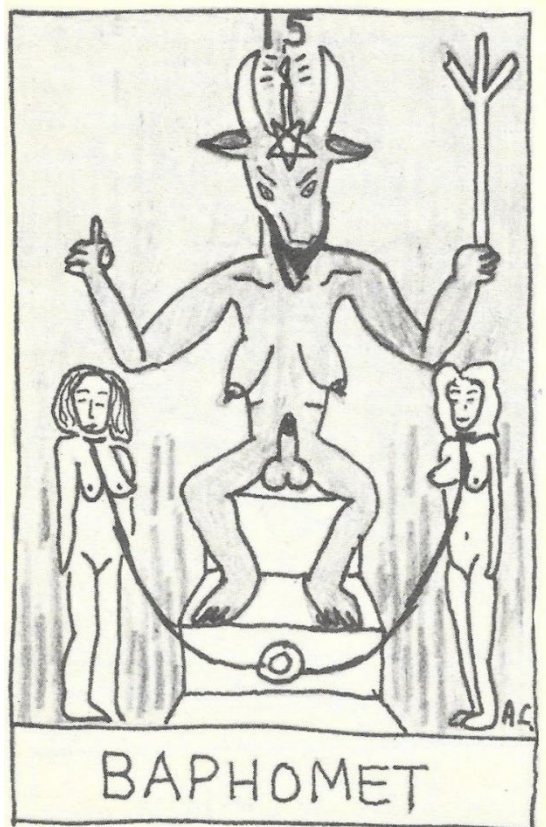


The Elder from Crowther's published set



The Elder - John Upton's personal TotAW card

John retained all of Arnold's name changes apart from in one example: In the case of tarot trump number 15, 'The Devil'. Crowther has used the name 'Baphomet', but John has changed it to 'Cernunos'. Crowther depicts two women chained to the throne of Baphomet, but Upton drew a man and a woman.



With the Fool, Crowther's version shows a religious man. John Upton's version, shows a Bishop with his crozier and mitre. I think he placed extra emphasis on this card by using a religious figure of high-standing as 'The Fool' as John had no love for mainstream Christian religion. Here, I show Arnold's and John Upton's own hand-coloured version of the card.



Arnold's Fool card – published version.



John Upton's own coloured Fool card

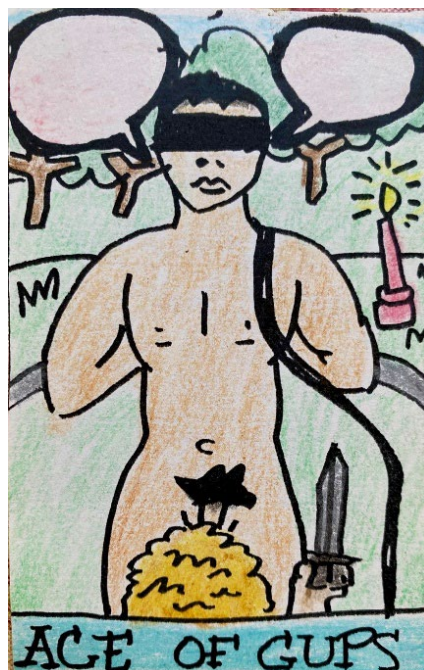
TotAW - The Minor Arcana

When it comes to the Minor Arcana, John decided to include other noted figures such as Old George Pickingill, who takes his place on the Ace of Wands and the witch hunter general, Matthew Hopkins, as the King of Swords. John also replaced the 'Pages' and 'Knights' with 'Maids' and 'Summoners'. Here is my personal, self-coloured version of the King of Swords of the TotAW:



My hand- coloured version of a TotAW card

Many of the minor arcana depict scenes from our initiation rites and practices. For example, the tarot cards from the two of cups through to the six, depict the five-fold kiss. The ace illustrates the giving of the two passwords which are at the core of our Craft family:



My coloured version of this TotAW card.

The Wands and Pentacles depict scenes and contain symbolism that many readers will recognise:

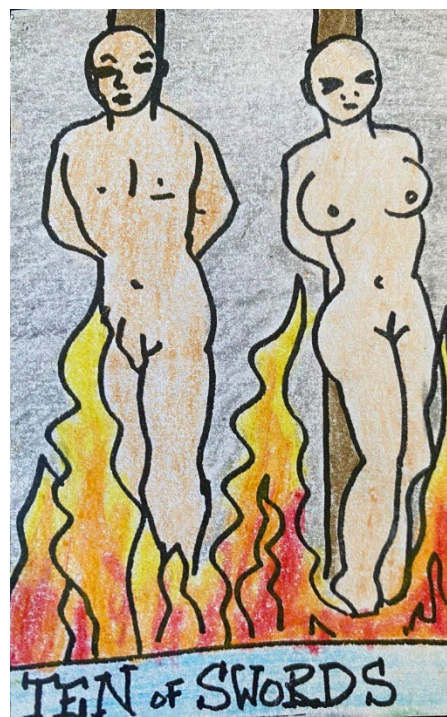


My coloured version of this TotAW card



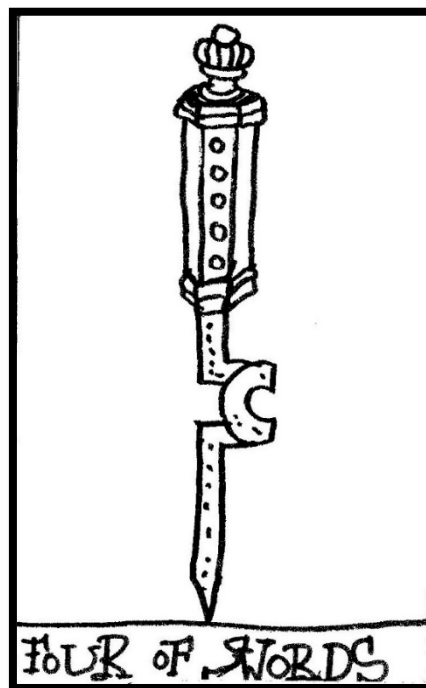
John Upton's personal coloured version of this card

The swords are a little different and several illustrate concepts of historical witchcraft with scenes showing the torture of witches:



My coloured version of this card from the TotAW.

The four of swords depicts a 'witch pricker' used during the witch trials and John's image is likely based on an illustration seen in Reginald Scott's 1584 book, *The Discovery of Witchcraft*.



Four of Swords from the TotAW – uncoloured.



Henry Fuseli's painting, 'The Nightmare' serves as inspiration for one of the seven of sword cards. Showing a grinning monkey-like incubus squatting on top of a naked sleeping woman. It seems appropriate for a tarot card about deception.

For the Summoner of Pentacles, John drew 'The Sorcerer' – an ancient cave painting found at the cave of the Trois-Frères, in France, thought to date approximately to 13,000 BCE. Interestingly, Margaret Murray, having seen an early published drawing of 'The Sorcerer' called

the image 'the first depiction of a deity on Earth'. Perhaps John knew this and is why he chose it as the Summoner for this suit?



My coloured version of the Seven of Swords from TofTAW

When it comes to interpreting them, it has been suggested that some of the cards don't hold true to the traditional meanings for Tarot Cards. John never wrote an accompanying interpretation book and likely never would have for he was a visual artist. If you are a traditional tarot-reader, they perhaps wouldn't all speak to you, but instead could invite you to look at things in a new way?

This muse of this article delivered me a fascinating journey which took me to places I hadn't anticipated. I thrilled at the discovery of images of the cards Arnold gave to Doreen, and laughed at the mental visits from John Upton as I pulled him back via memories lanes.

I am reminded of the true gift of artists; something that is true of both Arnold Crowther and John Upton: With their creations, they leave something of themselves behind, something tangible that help us to remember and reconnect with them, their ideas, and beliefs: I have long thought that this, was the true gift of an artist.



I want to close with a quote from Simon Wood's article:

*Are these cards unique or is this a common theme amongst some traditions? If it is unique, then hopefully this article will encourage people to get thinking and creative. In today's world we expect everything immediately. Everything is expected to conform to a perfect pattern and standard. You can now buy tarot cards which are complete sets of beautiful artwork or with themes that have nothing in common with the original patterns created in tarot history. But for me, this Witches' Tarot just blows all of those out of the water for a working set...*²¹

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Iona Winton, Simon Wood, Ashley Mortimer, Clive Harper, Dr Marco Romeo-Pitone, Edmund Zebrowski, Jon Hughett, Mike Waldyn, the Doreen Valiente Foundation and the Muse.

¹My thanks to Edmund Zebrowski for ushering in this muse.

² Arnold and Patrica Crowther, *The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft*, University Books (1974) This book is 'borrowable' for free online here: <https://archive.org/details/secretsofancient0000crow/mode/2up>

³ Ibid. P.99

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Martello

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Arnold and Patrica Crowther, *The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft*, University Books (1974) p.100

⁷ 'Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* But Were Afraid to Ask' (1972)

⁸ For example, it can be seen that the 'G's and the 'R's look different and some of the detail in the drawings has been done differently.

⁹ Arnold and Patrica Crowther, *The Secrets of Ancient Witchcraft*, University Books (1974) p.101

¹⁰ Email to me from Clive Harper who saw Crowther's original 'Witches Tarot': 'To the best of my knowledge, Arnold only did the Major Arcana.' 9th December 2020

¹¹ <https://www.arnellart.com/manteia/frame-2-orange.htm> (unfortunately, many download links are not currently working – Aug 2023)

¹² Mail Art is an artistic movement centred on sending small-scale works through the post. This now-global movement initially developed out of what eventually became the New York Correspondence School and the Fluxus movements of the 1960s.

¹³ More info on Jensen's Tarot project can be found here: <https://www.wopc.co.uk/otc/aboutkfi>

¹⁴ K. Frank Jensen, 'A standard 'Witches Tarot' pattern?' *Manteia* (February 1995) p.6
https://www.thewica.co.uk/files/ugd/4f0e4f_8363907340614b878f15e2502954adf5.pdf?index=true

¹⁵ Bill Butler, *Dictionary of the Tarot*, (Schocken Books, 1977) p.211 (this is the same as *The Definitive Tarot*)

¹⁶ https://www.thewica.co.uk/files/ugd/4f0e4f_8363907340614b878f15e2502954adf5.pdf?index=true

¹⁷ Simon Wood, 'The Witches Tarot', *The Enquiring Eye*, Spring 2020, pp 42-44. Readable online here: https://www.academia.edu/99654359/The_Enquiring_Eye_Journal_of_the_Museum_of_Witchcraft_and_Magic_Issue_3

¹⁸ <https://www.alchemywebsite.com/tarot/database/OtherEurope/record25.html> Also see:

<https://tarotgarden.com/tarot-of-the-ayrshire-witches/> , <https://www.thewica.co.uk/john-upton>

¹⁹ More info on Jensen's TotAW prints: <https://taroflexions.wordpress.com/2013/02/08/tarot-goes-academic/>

²⁰ Simon Wood, 'The Witches Tarot', *The Enquiring Eye*, Spring 2020, pp42-44. Readable online here: https://www.academia.edu/99654359/The_Enquiring_Eye_Journal_of_the_Museum_of_Witchcraft_and_Magic_Issue_3

²¹ Ibid.