

## The Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards: A Portrayal of 15th Century Courtly Society

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## **John Cabot University**

Department of Art History and Studio Art

Bachelor of Arts in Art History  
Minor in Political Science and Legal Studies

The Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards: A Portrayal of 15th Century Courtly Society

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## **Abstract**

This thesis studies the Visconti-Sforza luxury cards, three illuminated tarot decks realized between Cremona and Milan during 15th century for the two ruling families, Visconti and Sforza. The three decks are a remarkable example of International Gothic style, but they also constitute a detailed representation of the Visconti and Sforza courts. This thesis specifically examines the way in which the gender and social extraction of the characters featuring on the cards determine their position within the hierarchical courtly system. Additionally, this thesis will also explain the way in which such hierarchical structure provides the basis for the rules of the games that were played with tarot cards during the 15th century. Ultimately, the game of tarot served the educational purpose of instructing the players of the game about how they should behave according to their gender and social position at court.

## **Dedication**

*To Artidoro, Giovanni and Edoardo, my saving stars.*

## Acknowledgements

Alla Professoressa Salvadori e alla Professoressa Smyth, che mi hanno accompagnata in questo viaggio meraviglioso con dedizione, ironia e fiducia.

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To Professor Clough, who has opened the door to new fascinating possibilities.

A Giuseppina, perché un'amicizia nata sotto il cielo di San Lorenzo è una promessa fattaci dal fato. A noi il compito di mantenerla.

To Giuseppina, because a friendship born under the starry night of Saint Laurence's is fate's promise to us. Ours is the duty to keep it.

A Benedetta, i cui abbracci sono fatti di morbide risate che lei distribuisce a chi incontra sul suo cammino.

To Benedetta, whose embraces are made of soft laughter distributed to the people she encounters on her path.

A Giada, compagna di scherzi e discorsi, e all'estate che porta nel cuore.

To Giada, companion of jokes and talks, and to the summer she carries in her heart.

A Giuseppe, amico di canzoni, di tuffi e di mare, un mare che ci ha sempre uniti e accompagnati senza mai essere invadente.

To Giuseppe, friend of songs, of diving and of the sea; a sea that always kept us united and accompanied us, without ever being intrusive.

A Lorenzo, al nostro primo incontro su una nave stipata di personaggi inventati, che a squarciagola urlavano i nostri segreti. Questi, ce li siamo confessati sin dal primo sguardo.

To Lorenzo and to our first encounter aboard a ship packed with imaginary characters, who yelled our secrets out loud. Secrets we exchanged from our first glance.

Alla mia piccola, grande Viviana. La vita che ci ha viste sorelle non ci è bastata, così abbiamo deciso di ritrovarci da amiche in questa.

To my little, great Viviana. Because the life that saw us as sisters was not enough, thus we have decided to meet again as friends.

A Martina, che costruisce una casa nel cuore di ogni persona che incontra. La porta d'ingresso, i ricordi. La sua bontà, la cucina, in cui lei in persona ti offre una tazza di tè chiedendoti: "Allora?"

To Martina, who builds a house in the heart of any person she meets. The front door, the reminiscing. Her goodness, the kitchen where she herself offers you a cup of tea while she asks you: "*Allora?*"

A Serena, la mia fatina, che con un incantesimo ha voluto regalarmi un po' di pace. A lei auguro un vento benevolo che la trasporti fin sulle nuvole, che la accoglieranno per tutto il tempo che vorrà restare.

To Serena, my fairy, who with a spell gifted me a little peace. To her I wish a benevolent wind to carry her to the clouds that will welcome her for as long as she wants to stay.

Alla mia amatissima Alexandra, che intrecciando desideri e sogni tesse la trama di amicizie senza tempo.

To my beloved Alexandra, who weaves wishes and dreams to create timeless friendships.

A Irina, la compagna di giochi ritrovata nella gioia di un'antica infanzia.

To Irina, dearest re-found playmate from an ancient childhood.

A Lea, principessa guerriera. La sua arma più potente, il suo sguardo sul mondo.

To Lea, a warrior princess. Her most powerful weapon is her seering gaze on the world.

A Raoul e ai nostri rari incontri fortuiti. Per la sua saggezza e le sue tazze di tè. Prometto che non smetterò mai di essere scandalosa.

To Raoul and our rare, fortuitous encounters. For his wisdom and cups of tea. I promise I will never cease to be scandalous.

A Parker, che ha raccolto il mio cuore aperto da terra, e dopo averlo risanato, lo ha riposto fiducioso nella sicurezza delle mie mani.

To Parker, who picked my open heart from up the floor and, after mending it, replaced it in the safety of my own hands.

Alla sorprendente Camila, che è stata capace di trasformare una nottata spenta e fosca in un turbinio di luci e colori nei locali di Roma. Perché lei crede fermamente nella cura del sorriso, possa il suo non spezzarsi mai.

To the surprising Camila, who was able to transform a drab and gloomy night into the swirl of lights and colors of the nightclubs of Rome. Because she firmly believes in the healing power of laughter. May her smile never be broken.

A Luca e Gianmarco, amici che mi accompagnano dal primo giorno. Tra gossip, bicchieri, liti e riconciliazioni, sono sempre stati i miei protettori segreti.

To Luca and Gianmarco, friends who have accompanied me since the very first day. With gossip, glasses, fights and reconciliations, they have been my secret guardians all along.



A Giacomo, che prima con la sua vicinanza e poi con la sua assenza mi ha sempre indicato la strada da percorrere per essere libera, pagando per entrambi il prezzo amaro della lontananza.

To Giacomo who, with his presence first and his absence later, always indicated me the path to take to be free, paying the sour price of distance for both of us.

Alla mia famiglia, che non ha mai tentato di farmi diventare qualcosa che io non fossi già. Grazie dal profondo del cuore.

To my family, who has never tried to make me become what I already am not. Thank you from the heart.

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# Chapter 1

This thesis is an investigation of the figural representations featuring on three 15th century decks of tarot cards commissioned by the Visconti and Sforza families and produced in their domains in Milan and Cremona. Despite the fact that luxury tarot cards were common in many courts of Renaissance Italy and Europe, the relatively narrow focus allows for a nuanced exploration of the way gender and status were represented on these luxury objects. The main goal is to show how the depictions provide insights into key aspects of the courtly ideology operating within the Milanese court.

A broader aim is to show that luxury objects such as tarot cards should be understood as an integral part of artistic production in the Renaissance. Art historians have increasingly expanded the scope of inquiry to visual representations that have been traditionally dismissed because not considered art- or Art.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, an “elitist” focus still conditions the study and practice of art history. The traditional literature on tarot cards (luxury or otherwise) is a case in point. While they have certainly been the object of scholarly interest, it is only very recently that they have been considered worthy of art historical scrutiny, yet they still feature only marginally in Renaissance art historical studies.<sup>2</sup> The thesis contends that a closer examination of painted tarot cards will not only give them their due as artworks worthy of careful investigation but will provide insights into Renaissance painting as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> See also the discussion later in this chapter

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

The two goals of the thesis are addressed in detail in the next three chapters. Chapter two provides a historical and cultural overview of the Visconti and Sforza courts and their relation to the three decks they commissioned. Particular attention will be given to the dates of the three decks mainly through the study of family emblems and stylistic choices, both strictly connected to the cards' patrons. Chapter three is structured around a formal and critical analysis of the cards (especially the Colleoni-Baglioni deck, but references will be inevitably made also to the Visconti di Modrone and Brambilla decks). Lastly, chapter four considers the three Visconti-Sforza decks within the context of 15th century Lombard art (especially in relation to illuminated manuscripts), but also investigates the way in which tarot cards were used by the elites in the 15th century, and how the cards figural representations re-inscribed key elements of Renaissance courtly culture and ideology.

The remainder of this introductory chapter begins with a discussion of the traditional scholarly approach to tarot cards, namely investigations into their origins, development and spread. It then continues with an analysis of the major contributions of 20th century art historians to the study of the Visconti-Sforza tarot cards themselves. Their approach is overall still relatively traditional, the special focus being that of artistic attribution. However, it also provides the basis to further argue that the cards should be understood as an integral part of Renaissance artistic production. The last part of this chapter reviews the scholarly literature that has contributed to the thesis' exploration of the imagery in the three decks in the context of gender and status in Renaissance courtly culture.

### **Traditional approach 1: the origins and history of tarot cards**

Tarot card decks consist in cards with numerical value, the *naibi*, traditionally represented by batons or wands, cups or hearts, pentacles or squares, swords or lances (fig. 1) and figural cards,

known as the major arcana or *triumphs* (fig.2). The traditional approach to the study of the cards has focused on their origin and development in time, with the major arcana capturing most of the attention. However, since the revival of academic interest for tarot in the 18th century, after a period of total obliviousness, academics, scholars, masons and enthusiasts have struggled to find some concrete evidence to support their many hypotheses on the origins of the cards and their subsequent mutations.<sup>3</sup> In fact, to this day, scholars have very divergent opinions concerning the origins of tarot cards. The best and perhaps the only approach possible for contemporary scholars is to take into account those hypotheses that have encountered the greatest academic success, keeping in mind none of them can be considered reliable in their entirety.

Oswald Wirth's magistral volume dedicated to tarot provides a historical overview. He begins by citing the works of 18th century freemasons who were strong believers in the Egyptian origins of tarot.<sup>4</sup> While this was a position that was further articulated in the 19th century,<sup>5</sup> other scholars of the time advocated for Jewish origins, specifically that there are clear references in the cards to the Sephirots of the Jewish Cabala.<sup>6</sup> According to Alphonse Louis Constant, known as Eliphas Lévi Zahed, probably the most influential occultist in the 19th century, tarot is instead to be considered a *summa* of ancient civilizations, containing concepts of philosophy, alchemy, theology and astrology that only initiates to the ancient arts of magic and alchemy fully grasped. More recent scholars, such as Wirth himself, however, argue that the tarot circulating in Europe

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<sup>3</sup> In the 18th century, two of the most authoritative sources on occultism were *Primitive World* by Court de Gebelin and *History of Magic* by Christian.

<sup>4</sup> Oswald Wirth. *I Tarocchi*. Roma, Edizioni Mediterranee. 2010. 45-46 Gebelin and Eteilla asserted that tarot cards derive from the Book of Toth, a sacred initiatic hieroglyphic text in Ancient Egypt.

<sup>5</sup> Wirth, pp. 48-49. Christian sustained these hypotheses, stating that the 22 major arcana are actually Egyptian hieroglyphs figuring on the internal walls of the Pyramid in Memphis.

<sup>6</sup> Wirth, 48-49

from the Middle Ages were not arcane or rich in concealed information.<sup>7</sup> They also argue that the game of *naibi* itself originated in the medieval Islamic Middle East, probably in Persia, despite the fact that the Islamic context of Muslim imports was generally negated by Christians in the West.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the only thing that may be asserted with any degree of certainty in terms of origins is that tarot cards developed from sets of didactic cards circulating in Europe during the Middle Ages. Wirth mentions the work of the so-called *imagiers*, literally painters of images, who decorated rectangular pieces of paper, parchment or cardboard with secular and religious motifs: saints, pagan deities, allegories of the seven planets, the seven moral virtues, the seven sacraments, the seven capital sins, etc. Still according to Wirth, these cards were assembled in packs in which the figures were numbered and ordered following hierarchical schemes. Their aim was that of amusing and educating people, especially children.<sup>9</sup>

The evolution of these cards into proper tarot decks is also a subject of debate. Sandrina Bandera and Gabriele Mandel maintain that some cards of the major arcana are inspired by 14th and 15th century Italian secular and religious processions, which is why they are also named *triumphi*. In addition, Bandera also argues that there are connections between the 14th century poet Petrarch's *Triumphus Cupidinis* (Cupid's Triumph over Gods and Men), and the major arcana

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<sup>7</sup> Wirth, 50. Michael Dummett, *The Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards*, George Braziller Inc, New York, 1986. 3

<sup>8</sup> Dummett, *The Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards*, 4. Gabriele Mandel, *I Tarocchi dei Visconti*, Monumentale Longobardica, Milano. 1 Gabriele Mandel believes that the numeral cards, also known as *naibi*, probably derive from numeral cards already used in 10th century China. The information we have about these cards is contained in the Chinese encyclopedia *Ching tze tung*, where a voice describes a game made of 32 decorated ivory tablets belonging to the emperor Kao Tsong. Apparently, the tablets were probably inspired by the games of domino and dice.

<sup>9</sup> Dummett, 4; Wirth, 48; Maria Raid, "The Ambraser Hofsaunderspiel: Playing Cards as a Visual Source for Courtly Life during the Late Middle Ages" in Classen, *Pleasure and Leisure in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Toys, Games, and Entertainment*. De Gruyter. 2019. 455-456



depicting the Popess, the Pope, the Emperor, the Chariot and the Lover.<sup>10</sup> Michael Dummett argues that, although contemporary tarot cards (the so-called Marseille Tarot) were more likely invented in France, extant documents report the existence of decorated cards in Italy since the late 1200.<sup>11</sup> Dummett also tackles the issue of where tarot cards first appeared in Italy. He has posited that Ferrara is a likely place, citing the city's love and enjoyment of pleasure, leisure and appreciation for games. He also considers Bologna and Milan as the possible "mothers" of tarot.<sup>12</sup> Wirth, on the other hand, contends that the most ancient tarot deck comes from 14th century Venice.<sup>13</sup>

Even if the place where tarot originated in Italy were to be established, it must be stressed that in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance the characteristics of tarot card decks varied not only depending on the cities or regions in which they were produced, but from deck to deck within the same production center.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the cards' function and the games that were played with them changed from place to place and from region to region.<sup>15</sup> There was none of the uniformity that characterizes modern decks.<sup>16</sup> Cards were handmade, painted over parchment, paper or cardboard, and this explains their diversity. It is only with the introduction of printmaking, and so the possibility to reproduce a greater number of decks from the same prototypes, that uniformity becomes increasingly standard. This also coincides with the greatest peak in popularity of tarot

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<sup>10</sup> Mandel, 6. Sabrina Bandera, *Bonifacio Bembo. Tarocchi Visconti dell'Accademia di Brera*. Martello Libreria, Milano. 1991. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Dummett, 1-3.

<sup>12</sup> Dummett, 6-8.

<sup>13</sup> Wirth, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Dummett, 4-8

<sup>15</sup> Mandel, 5, 8-11. Dummett, 6-9.

<sup>16</sup> The sequence, numeration and allegorical representation of the major arcana of modern tarot decks do not correspond to the decks in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

across Europe: cities in France and Germany started producing their own decks which then spread to Austria, England, Italy and Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup>

### **Traditional approach 2: the Visconti-Sforza decks and artistic attribution**

One of the biggest issues in art historical research regarding the Visconti-Sforza tarot decks has been attribution, identifying the artists who painted them. In fact, the most authoritative academic works discussing the three Visconti-Sforza cards attempt to solve- partially if not in full- the issue of attribution. This has entailed careful stylistic comparisons with some of the leading artists of the day as an examination of extant documentary sources. It is not one of the aims of this thesis to confirm or deny the Visconti-Sforza decks' attribution to specific artists or workshops, but in order to "elevate" luxury tarot cards to the status they deserve within art history, it is crucial to investigate how they relate to other coeval forms of art, especially painting, that have been more traditionally addressed as "high art".

The Visconti-Sforza tarot cards are considered exemplary of the International Gothic style, which was popular in Lombardy from the end of the 14th and into the 15th century. It was a style that was deeply connected to the region's courtly tradition, a tradition which, as we shall see in Chapters 2 and 4, the Visconti and Sforza families fully participated in. The three Visconti-Sforza decks have traditionally been attributed to the Cremonese artist Bonifacio Bembo (ca. 1420-1482) who was not only one of the exponents of this style but was attached to the court of the Duke of Milan Francesco Sforza (duke 1450-1466) and his successor Galeazzo Maria Sforza (duke 1466-1476). The attribution is sustained by stylistic resemblances between the cards and the Cremonese artist's other paintings (although there is an ongoing debate on which works are of certain

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<sup>17</sup> Dummett, *The Visconti-Sforza cards*, 9-11. Mandel, *I Tarocchi dei Visconti*, 8-9.

attribution), as well as by written documents of the time.<sup>18</sup> There are, however, contrasting opinions regarding this attribution, with some scholars providing alternative names of Lombard artists or *botteghe*.

Perhaps most notable are those of Alfonso Venturi and Francesco Toesca, two of the most important Italian medieval art historians working in the first half of the 20th century and some of the first to lead scholarly studies on these cards. Both scholars attributed the three packs to the Zavattari, a family of 15th century artists working in Lombardy. Again, the hypothesis is based on the formal and stylistic resemblances between the figures appearing on the cards and those appearing in other paintings by the artists, specifically, in this case, with the Zavattari's frescoes depicting the Lombard Queen Teodolinda in the Monza cathedral of St. John the Baptist.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the authoritative opinion of Venturi and Toesca, another leading Italian art historian, Roberto Longhi, whose field of expertise was the Italian Renaissance, insisted on attributing the Visconti-Sforza tarot decks to Bembo.<sup>20</sup> Although he lacked strong evidence to support his attribution,<sup>21</sup> many other scholars including Wittgens, Rasmo, Ludovici and Ferrari,<sup>22</sup> Moakley, Mandel and Klein<sup>23</sup> agree with Longhi. In a different vein, Algeri and Germano

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<sup>18</sup> Mandel, 14. Germano Mulazzani, *I Tarocchi Viscontei e Bonifacio Bembo. Il Mazzo di Yale*. Shell Italia, Milano. 1981. 9-12

<sup>19</sup> Their attribution is discussed in detail in Giuliana Algeri, *Gli Zavattari: una Famiglia di Pittori e la Cultura Tardogotica Lombarda. De Luca Editori d'Arte*, Roma. 1981. 41-59 See also Janice Shell, "La Cappella di Teodolinda. Gli Affreschi degli Zavattari", *Monza. Il Duomo nella Storia e nell'Arte*. Credito Artigiano, Monza. 1989. 190

<sup>20</sup> Bandera, *Bonifacio Bembo. I Tarocchi Viscontei dell'Accademia di Brera*. 14

<sup>21</sup> Bandera, 14

<sup>22</sup> Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, *Arte Lombarda dai Visconti agli Sforza*. Cassa di Risparmio delle Provincie Lombarde, Milano. 1959.

<sup>23</sup> Bandera, *Bonifacio Bembo. I Tarocchi Viscontei dell'Accademia di Brera*. 14

Mulazzani have recently argued that such elaborate cards may hardly be considered the work of a single artist.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, 14th and 15th century documents report that artists used to attend to their commissions in *equipes*, and Bembo was no exception.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore possible that the three tarot decks involved more than one artist, thus being the product of a *bottega*.

Whatever the case may be, it is fair to say that most scholars who addressed this topic felt the need to “justify” themselves for their interest in the Visconti-Sforza tarot cards. There was an understanding that these “peculiar” yet fascinating objects had little to do with the study of art history. And yet, despite the fact that a number of these scholars refer to their study of tarot cards as a diversion from their more authoritative and serious pursuits in art history, they could not help but connect them to works of art they considered real masterpieces. Needless to say, the mere fact that artists who produced “masterpieces” were also commissioned luxury tarot cards should have alerted them to the flaws in their thinking, especially to the flawed distinction between high and low art.

By the early 20th century this kind of positioning has a very long legacy. Many, perhaps most, contemporary art historians now consider the 16th century Vasarian distinction between major and lower arts as anachronistic and misleading.<sup>26</sup> Vasari argued that painting, sculpture and architecture were the three major, most noble arts.<sup>27</sup> Yet his definition of those three “media”, especially of painting and sculpture was very narrow. In fact, he disregarded many forms of artistic expression even though they entailed painting and sculpting. His artists’ *vitae* focus on Italian art

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<sup>24</sup> Giuliana Algeri, “La Pittura Lombarda nel Primo Quattrocento”. *La Pittura Italiana. Il Quattrocento*, Vol. I, Milano. 1987. 65

<sup>25</sup> Mulazzani, 10

<sup>26</sup> Preziosi.

<sup>27</sup> Preziosi.

beginning with the 13th century painter Cimabue. Italian late medieval and Renaissance illuminated manuscripts, just as luxury cards, are also painted, but they do not feature in Vasari's overall (purportedly) evolutionary schema.

Beginning in the 19th century, and increasingly in the 20th century onwards, scholars studying the Middle Ages, the period which Vasari specifically considered one of artistic decline, have been reassessing his legacy. But as mentioned above, an “elitist” focus does not still condition the study and practice of art history. Fortunately, the connections established between the “high art” production of artists such as the Zavattari and Bonifacio Bembo (as well as Cicognara, Michelino da Besozzo, and Andrea Mantegna) and tarot cards has, in fact, also raised the interest and awareness of art historians into the field's ingrained biases. Most notably, the Musée Française de la Carte à Jouer in Issy-les-Moulineux has recently (December 2020) opened an exhibition on 15th century illuminated Italian tarot cards.<sup>28</sup>

The exhibition's title *Tarot Enluminés. Chefs-D'œuvre de la Renaissance Italienne* itself refers to illuminated tarot cards as masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>29</sup> The exhibition's aim, according to the exhibition's catalogue, is to demonstrate how the iconographic, iconological and stylistic study of illuminated cards can give an extraordinary contribution to the study of Italian Renaissance painting as a whole. This thesis is hopefully a further contribution to the endeavor. More specifically, Chapter four examines the relationship of cards to Renaissance illuminated manuscripts, an art form that, at least in the Vasarian scheme, has not been considered in relation to the Visconti-Sforza decks.

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<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to visit the exhibition.

<sup>29</sup> Musée Français de la Carte à Jouer, *Tarots Enluminés. Chefs D'Œuvre de la Renaissance Italienne*. Dossier de Presse. Issy-les-Moulineux. 2020. [www.issy.com](http://www.issy.com)

## New approaches: analyzing gender and status

Viewing history and art history through the lense of gender as a viable or, indeed, vital scholarly approach has been acknowledged by the academic endeavor for many decades now.<sup>30</sup> In art history this kind of enquiry has been well-established at least since the late 1980's.<sup>31</sup> Scholars in late Medieval and Renaissance history and art history are among those who have embraced the approach of a gender reading of images and literature.<sup>32</sup> Studying how gender and social rank influenced the way in which people performed their gender roles in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance offers the possibility of acquiring a fuller understanding of social interactions between individuals.

For the purposes of this thesis, a gendered reading of the images decorating the Visconti-Sforza cards is fundamental to study the way in which the characters represented interacted among each other within the courtly endeavor according to their gender and social standing. Specifically, in the formal and stylistic analysis of the figures painted over the Visconti-Sforza cards in Chapter 3, the specific focus is on costume, on how the depicted figures' clothes determine their rank and

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<sup>30</sup> A seminal article in the humanities is Joan Wallach, Scott, "Gender: A useful Category of Historical Analysis" *American Historical Review* 91, 1986. 1053-75; see also Whitney, Davis, "Gender" in Nelson, R.S. and Shiff, R. *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd edition, 2003, 330-340 and Joan Wallach, Scott, "Gender: Still a Useful Category of Analysis?" *Diogenes* 57/1, 2010. 7-14. Other key publications include: Karma, Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies" in *ibid.* et al eds. *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, 1997. 1-21. Judith, Bennett, and Ruth, Karras, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, 2013; Bitel, L. and Lifshitz, F. eds. *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*. 2008.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Davis, W. "Gender" in Nelson, R. S. and Shiff, R. *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd edition, 2003. 330-344.

<sup>32</sup> Madelin, Caviness, "Feminism, Gender Studies and Medieval Studies" *Diogenes* 57/1. 2010 30-45; Martha, Easton, "Feminism" *Studies in Iconography* 33, 2012. 99-112 (Special Issue of journal entitled *Medieval Art History Today- Critical Term*, Rowe, N. ed); Sherry, Lindquist, "Gender" *Studies in Iconography* 33, 2012. 113-130 (Special Issue of journal entitled *Medieval Art History Today- Critical Terms*, Rowe, N. ed); Brigitte, Kurmann-Schwarz, "Gender and Medieval Art" in Rudolph, C. ed. *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, 2nd ed. 2019. Marian, Bleeke, "Feminist Approaches to Medieval Visual Culture: An Introduction". *Medieval Feminist Forum*. 44/2. 2008. 49-52.

gender, and how each individual card's importance and value within the game and in relation to the other cards creates a coherent courtly hierarchy.

Scholars like Burns and Raid have dedicated extensive analysis to the way in which clothes shaped identity in Medieval society. Although Burns addresses mainly the function clothes absolved in Medieval chivalric poetry, her work is an essential contribution to gender and Medieval studies and a fundamental reference for this thesis. On the other hand, Raid looks at how clothing constructed identity (in terms of gender and role) in an Austrian pack of playing cards. Raid, like other scholars, concludes that the game of tarot essentially served the educational purpose of telling players their position and status they covered within the courtly or feudal system on the basis of gender and status.<sup>33</sup> Playing cards absolve this function in a double action: visual representation and images determine the rules of the game, and the way it is played, in which circumstances and by who.

Recent scholars have acknowledged the importance clothes played in political and religious life during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Through clothes, people expressed their social status, their wealth and political or religious ideas. Erin Griffey examines how clothes and jewels shaped the gendered and political identity of women in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. Griffey examines how illustrious queens such as Isabella D'Este, Eleanor of Austria, queen Elizabeth I, Anna of Denmark and Christina of Sweden marshalled their clothes to express their political ideologies, as well as signaling their loyalty to their husband, father or dynasty. Griffey also

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<sup>33</sup> Maria Raid, *The Ambraser Hofsaeterspiel: Playing Cards as a Visual Source for Courtly Life during the Late Middle Ages*. 454-456

examines clothes and jewels as exchangeable goods, which often served as currency in every day's economic transactions, just like other luxury objects (luxury tarot cards themselves).<sup>34</sup>

Kings, queens and, more generally, members of the aristocracy used to give away their clothes to their attendees and courtesans, giving proof of magnificence through their largesse towards people of inferior status. In that regard, Susan Gaylard examines the letters written by 15th century courtesans such as Baldassarre Castiglione and Pietro Aretino, who both refer to clothes and the way they contributed to their public image. Although both courtesans acknowledged the importance of displaying one's wealth in order to make a social statement, they also condemned excessive attention to dress and the borrowing of clothes from other owners as effeminate.<sup>35</sup>

Aretino's letters testify the ambiguous value clothes gained in Renaissance society: on the one hand they were used to assert authority by both men and women. On the other, the wrong use of the same objects reflected negatively on their owner, becoming a symbol of his or her inadequacy and lack of virtue. Additionally, Gaylard argues that, in Renaissance Venice, social hierarchy was defined through clothes, colors, fabrics and cut of the sleeves.<sup>36</sup> Sleeves, buttons, belts, skirts and blouses were detachable items that could be assembled in various fashions and, of course, could be easily exchanged between people of different social classes.<sup>37</sup> Lastly, Gaylard

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<sup>34</sup> Erin Griffey. *Sartorial Politics in Early Modern Europe: Fashioning Women. Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700*, 12. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Gaylard. "Banishing the Hollow Man: Print, Clothing, and Aretino's Emblem of Truth", *Hollow Men: Writing, Objects, and Public Image in Renaissance Italy*. Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2013. 124.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Gaylard. "Banishing the Hollow Man: Print, Clothing, and Aretino's Emblem of Truth". 128.

<sup>37</sup> Gaylard, 128.



observes that when clothes were exchanged among people, they evoked the presence (and status) of their previous owner.<sup>38</sup>

Overall, gender and social identity were constructed also through clothes, as well as the way individuals performed their masculinity and femininity in society. The Visconti-Sforza cards are an example of how the clothes depicted define the figures' gender and social identity within the Milanese court, strengthening the hierarchical structure of the courtly endeavor.

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<sup>38</sup> Gaylard, 134.

## Chapter 2

### The three tarot decks

Traditional tarot decks are composed of a total number of 78 cards: 22 triumphs or major arcana, and 56 *naibi* or minor arcana. Triumphs are mainly archetypal figures that have been associated with occult meanings since the 18th century. They are numbered from 1 (the Magician or Bagatto) to 21 (the World). The Fool is the card number 0 that closes the circle. For what concerns the *naibi*, they are divided into suits, respectively batons, cups, coins and swords. For each suit there are 10 numeral cards and four figures, also called cards of honor, namely Page, Knight, Queen and King.<sup>39</sup>

As mentioned in the previous chapter, decks of cards have circulated in Italy since 1300. However, the first examples of tarot decks are the three Visconti-Sforza packs from the second half of the 15th century.<sup>40</sup> These are the Visconti di Modrone deck, the Colleoni-Baglioni deck, and the Brambilla deck.<sup>41</sup> None of the three decks is complete.<sup>42</sup> Although they were produced in

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<sup>39</sup> Oswald Wirth. *I Tarocchi*. Roma, Edizioni Mediterranee. 2010. 43.

<sup>40</sup> Gabriele Mandel, *I Tarocchi dei Visconti*, Monumentale Longobardica, Milano. 5.

<sup>41</sup> The Visconti di Modrone deck is currently owned by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. The Colleoni-Baglioni deck is divided between the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo. The Brambilla deck is currently in the Pinacoteca di Brera.

<sup>42</sup> The Visconti di Modrone deck counts 67 cards, of which 11 triumphs, 17 cards of honor, and 39 *naibi*. This deck presents cards that have been omitted from later decks, such as Charity, Faith and Hope. Another peculiarity consists in the presence of additional figures among the cards of honor, depicting the so-called Maiden-Knights and Maidens. The Colleoni-Baglioni deck is almost complete. The only cards missing are the Devil, the Tower, the Three of Swords and the Knight of Pentacles. The Brambilla deck counts 49 cards, of which only two are triumphs (the Emperor and Fortune). There are 7 remaining cards of honor, respectively King, Queen and Knight of Wands, Knight and Page of Swords, Knight and Page of Pentacles. This information is in Mulazzani.

different years and were commissioned by different members of the Visconti and Sforza families, they present similar characteristics, especially regarding technique and materials used. The cards of all three packs are made of plastered cardboard over which the figures were painted with tempera and a gold-leaf (in the triumphs) or silver-leaf (in the *naibi*) background. The latter is characterized by geometrical and floral motifs realized *a punzone*.<sup>43</sup> (fig. 3) In all three decks, moreover, the mottos and coats of arms of the Visconti and Sforza families appear alongside those of the Holy Roman Empire, testifying the Milanese family's privileged relationship with the Emperor.<sup>44</sup> Other important Italian families connected to the dukes of Milan also occasionally feature on these cards.<sup>45</sup> (fig. 4)

There are also differences between the three decks. The dimensions of the cards vary from 189x90 mm for the Visconti di Modrone and the Brambilla decks, and 173x87 for the Colleoni-Baglioni deck. More importantly, there are stylistic variances among the figures in the three packs, suggesting that they were not produced at the same time. Bandera explains that traditional stylistic analysis for the cards is problematic because of the use of sketchbooks in the Italian *botteghe* during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The sketchbooks contained standardized figures artists belonging to specific schools or *botteghe* inserted in their works throughout the years. This technique, Bandera points out, makes it harder for art historians to provide not only exact dates, but also attributions to specific artists of the period. She also mentions that this is especially true for Lombard art. However, Bandera adds that, although the three decks present many similarities

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<sup>43</sup> This technique consists of using a punch from the back of a surface to create reliefs on said surface.

<sup>44</sup> The Visconti used to receive the official title of dukes of Milan from the Holy Roman Emperor since 1395.

<sup>45</sup> The card of the Lover from the Visconti di Modrone deck presents the emblem of the house of Savoy, connected to the Visconti and Sforza families through marital ties.

suggesting a single matrix, they also present many stylistic differences.<sup>46</sup> For example, the figures painted over the Visconti di Modrone cards are more preciously adorned by elaborate fabrics and jewels than those painted over the Colleoni and Brera decks. Even the colors used in the Visconti di Modrone deck have a brighter, more variegated tonality than those used in the other two decks. Overall, the deck preserved at the Morgan Library is characterized by such meticulous attention to detail that distinguishes it from later, less precious packs. Variations of this kind are a result of new interests in representational modes together with the introduction of new artistic trends that were introduced through the exchange of artistic knowledge between Italian and European schools.<sup>47</sup>

Essentially, scholars have attempted to date the three decks according to three criteria: contemporary written sources of the time, heraldry and the representation of events involving members of the Visconti and Sforza families, and formal differences between the three decks. For example, in the Visconti di Modrone deck the cards of Pentacles present the florin coined during Filippo Maria Visconti's dukedom. (fig. 5) This is one of the elements connecting these specific decks to its patron, hence to a more precise dating.<sup>48</sup>

Bandera, among others, also examines the written evidence. For example, she discusses a letter sent between 1450 and 1452 by Bianca Maria Visconti and her husband Francesco Sforza to the ducal treasurer residing in Cremona in which they instruct him to commission a deck of tarot

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<sup>46</sup> Sabrina Bandera, Bonifacio Bembo. *Tarocchi Viscontei dell'Accademia di Brera*. Martello Libreria, Milano. 1991. 15-17.

<sup>47</sup> Alison Cole, *Italian Renaissance Courts: Art, Pleasure and Power*. Laurence King Publishing, London. 2016. 15.  
Bandera, *Bonifacio Bembo. Tarocchi Viscontei dell'Accademia di Brera*.

<sup>48</sup> Germano Mulazzani, *I Tarocchi Viscontei e Bonifacio Bembo. Il Mazzo di Yale*. Shell Italia, Milano. 1981. 94.

cards. Bianca Maria and Francesco specify that the cards need to be of exquisite taste and magistral execution, and explicitly mention that they need to be decorated with the Visconti-Sforza coats of arms and mottos.<sup>49</sup> Because, as Bandera argues, it is reasonable to assume that the cards were completed within a year or so, this must refer to a deck commissioned between 1451 and 1452. She argues, on historical grounds, that this must be the Colleoni-Baglioni deck. In 1450 Francesco Sforza officially obtained the title of duke of Milan, which he held until 1470. After seizing power, he adopted the Visconti's heraldry to establish continuity between the two families and therefore claiming legitimacy for the Sforza rule. At the same time, he asserted himself and his Sforza successors as leaders of Milan by renouncing to the symbols referring to specific Visconti dukes.<sup>50</sup>

As Bandera's argument indicates, the written documentation is often viewed in combination with the evidence of heraldry. It should be mentioned, however, that throughout the years some cards got lost or badly consumed, needing replacement. This happened, for example, with the Colleoni-Baglioni deck, in which five triumphs (the Sun, the Moon, the Star, the World and Strength) are datable forty years after the deck's execution.<sup>51</sup>

The dating of the Visconti di Modrone deck is, on the other hand, based on both heraldry and the representation of a coin. The deck's *Lover* presents a couple performing the *dextera coniunctionis*, a wedding ritual that consists in the clasping of right hands (see fig. 3). The couple is standing under a tent adorned with the coats of arms of the houses of Visconti (the viper on silver ground) and Savoy (white cross on red ground). The man and woman getting married on this card have been identified either as Filippo Maria Visconti and Maria of Savoy, who got

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<sup>49</sup> Bandera, *Bonifacio Bembo. Tarocchi Viscontei dell'Accademia di Brera*. 25.

<sup>50</sup> Bandera, 14.

<sup>51</sup> Gabriele Mandel, *I Tarocchi dei Visconti*. 13.

married in 1428, or as Galeazzo Maria Sforza and Bona of Savoy, who got married in 1463. However, it must be the former because, as Mulazzani has shown, the cards of Pentacles from the same deck depicts the florin coined during Filippo Maria Visconti's dukedom (fig.5).<sup>52</sup> While coins also figure on the cards of Pentacles from the Colleoni-Baglioni and Brambilla decks, they are much more anonymous representations. While Filippo Maria Visconti's florin in the Visconti di Modrone deck bears a viper chewing a man's head, the duke's emblem, the florins shown in the other decks of later dating bear more generalized types, such as the one of the radiant sun.<sup>53</sup> Thus, I support the assumption that sees the Visconti di Modrone deck as the earliest of the three, for it was commissioned and produced around 1428, during Filippo Maria's dukedom.

### **Tarot Decks at the Court of the Dukes of Milan**

Besides featuring family emblems, some of the characters represented on the Visconti-Sforza may well represent actual members of the two families, strengthening the connection between the cards and their patrons. According to Gertrude Moakley, the Popess and the Hanged Man were meant to represent respectively Maifreda da Pirovano, Filippo Maria Visconti's ancestress, and Muzio Attendolo Sforza.<sup>54</sup> (fig. 6 and 7) This is to say that the iconography of the Visconti-Sforza tarot decks is deeply embedded in the history of the two families.

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<sup>52</sup> Mulazzani, *I Tarocchi Viscontei e Bonifacio Bembo. Il Mazzo di Yale*. 94-95.

<sup>53</sup> Mulazzani, 95.

<sup>54</sup> Gertrude Moakley, *The Tarot Cards Painted by Bonifacio Bembo for the Visconti and Sforza Family. An Iconographic and Historical Study*. The New York Public Library, New York. 1966 The Popess is wearing the habit of the Umiliate, a female monastic order. The woman is identified as sister Maifreda, who was elected Popess by the members of the sect of the Guglielmites of which she was a member. The sect was appointed as heretic by the Inquisition, and Maifreda was burned at the stake in 1300. Perjured knights were hung up by the heels and beaten as a punishment. If they managed to escape, they were painted hanging upside down. The Hanged Man, also known as the Traitor, is identified as Muzio Attendolo Sforza, Francesco's father, who betrayed the Pope and led an army for the pontifice's enemies. 72; 95.

In more general sense, the richly decorated cards are the result - and somehow mirror- the courtly endeavor they were produced in. Luxury tarot cards, together with other courtly objects, as well as public and private buildings were part of a complex program of public or semi-public self-representation endorsed and propagated by the powerful ruling families of the Italian city-states.<sup>55</sup> The Visconti and Sforza are no exception. The Visconti, in particular, remodeled their public image after the Angevin and then Aragonese kings of Naples, and the royal house of France with which they were related mostly through marriages.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, they were also close to the Holy Roman Emperor, a relationship dating back to the eleventh century when they were granted the title of imperial vassals. Since 1395 their loyalty led to their official designation as dukes of Milan.<sup>57</sup>

In a competitive political context, it was in the Visconti's interest, and even a necessity, to establish themselves as rulers of Milan whether as vassals or as dukes. The family had to fight its way towards the acquisition of the dukedom of Milan and faced serious challenges in maintaining it. They had numerous enemies, the worst being members of the family itself, who repeatedly contested inherited territories. These conflicts were often resolved through a treacherous use of diplomacy combined with gratuitous cruelty and violence. Indeed, Lombardy never enjoyed lasting peace while the Visconti were in charge. The power the dukes enjoyed was, nonetheless, great and often recklessly exercised. Their grip on power ended only when the male line became extinguished. The Sforza seized power when Filippo Maria's daughter, Bianca Maria, who was

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<sup>55</sup> Cole, *Italian Renaissance Courts: Art, Pleasure and Power*. 13, 16-17.

<sup>56</sup> Cole, 14-15.

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth R Bartlett, and Gillian C Bartlett, "The Vipers of Milan". *The Renaissance in Italy : A History*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. 2019. 114.

given in marriage to the *condottiero* Francesco Sforza.<sup>58</sup> But like their predecessors, the Sforza also had to legitimate their rule.

The fact that both families were great patrons of the arts must be viewed, at least in part, in the context of maintaining political standing through social, cultural and diplomatic relevance. Their large courts were famous for the internationality of their members and for their *magnificentia*. The Milanese court was one of the richest courts in Italy and Europe.<sup>59</sup> Its opulence was manifested through the generous patronage of secular and religious buildings, painted panels, luxury objects, as well as urban renewal and infrastructure projects such as streets and city walls. Eminent humanist scholars worked for the Visconti and the Sforza, Petrarch being an early but famous example in the second half of the 14th century.<sup>60</sup>

Foreign kings, princes and aristocrats also greatly admired the ability of the Milanese court, and more broadly, of Lombard artists, to meld the styles, techniques and materials coming from France, England and the Flanders, with the artistic tradition of central and northern Italy, creating a unique style that nonetheless fit within the fashionable matrix of the International Gothic, a visual idiom that was skillfully expressed in the works of the Lombard school which flourished at the apex of Filippo Maria's dukedom and continued through Francesco Sforza's and his descendants, and whose production included the Visconti-Sforza decks.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Jane Black, *Absolutism in Renaissance Milan: Plenitude of Power Under the Visconti and the Sforza, 1329-1535*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2009. 38-50.

<sup>59</sup> Cole, *Italian Renaissance Courts: Art, Pleasure and Power*. 18-19.

<sup>60</sup> Kenneth R Bartlett, and Gillian C Bartlett, "The Visconti of Milan". *The Renaissance in Italy: A History*. 112-113. In addition, both Moakley and Bandera assert that the cards of the Pope, the Emperor and the Lovers (and, I would add, the Chariot itself) were inspired by Petrarch's *Triumphum Cupidinis*, written between 1351 and 1374. This collection of poems is believed to have inspired some of the characters and form of the ceremonies, including processions, that took place in Italian cities during Carnival. A number of the triumph figures in tarot decks were, in turn, inspired by the Carnival and so too the *Triumphum Cupidinis*. See Moakley, *The Painted Cards by Bonifacio Bembo for the Visconti and Sforza Family. An Iconographic and Historical Study*, 43-53.

<sup>61</sup> Cole, *Italian Renaissance Courts: Art, Pleasure and Power*. 15-16.



Aware of the precarious nature of their hegemony, as well as of their unpopularity among the other aristocratic families, the “Vipers of Milan” needed the approval and deference (as well as fear) of their subjects. Showing themselves as refined courtiers and promoters of the arts, the Visconti-Sforza not only positioned themselves in a greater international political, social and cultural stage that bolstered their legitimacy as rulers on a European scale, but attempted to redeem their bad fame both in Italy and at a regional level.

## Chapter 3

This Chapter examines the cards representing courtly figures from the Colleoni and the Visconti di Modrone decks; specifically, the two triumphs of the Empress and the Emperor and the Kings, Queens, Maiden-Knights, Knights and Pages from the *naibi*. Although all the cards of both decks are of great interest from an artistic and a visual perspective, the depiction of the figures through costume provide the best insights into the Visconti-Sforza tarots and their relationship with the courtly *milieu* in which they were produced. In particular, my analysis will focus on how the figures' gender and age collocate them in a specific position in the hierarchy of the cards within the game of tarot, since this also followed the hierarchy of the actual members of Italian Renaissance courts.<sup>62</sup>

In the Visconti-Sforza tarot decks, all figures present a number of homologated physical features. A close observation of the characters reveals that they all have similar (if not identical) facial traits and hair color. Furthermore, there are recurrent colors, fabrics, embroidery patterns and motifs that appear on the clothes of the figures representative of each suit. There is also continuity between suits: the physical appearance and poses figures assume depend on their role and status. The repetition of visual elements creates a pattern of unity, a general sense of *ensemble* among the cards constituting each deck. This means that while the images on individual cards

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<sup>62</sup> The *Ambraser Hofaemterspiel* is a game of 15th century luxury cards found in Austria. The scope of the game was that of educating players about the hierarchy characterizing the feudal system. The characters' position within such hierarchy was determined by their gender, which in turn determined their role within the court. In these cards, gender and status are established through clothes. In Raid.

deserve to be looked at as self-contained, they are also part of a series to which they are inevitably connected. In fact, their meaning and value is dependent on their belonging to the greater object, to the tarot deck. Moreover, while the latter explains the necessity of comparing cards belonging to the same deck, comparing the different decks is also key, since they are ultimately part of the same cultural and artistic environment.<sup>63</sup>

That said, there are clear distinctions that mark gender differences with each deck and across the decks. These include -the physical or anatomical- for example, the presence of a beard to mark figures as male or the depiction of breasts and a rounded belly to mark figures as female. But even more important is costume or clothes in particular, since they fashion the bodies of the figures to highlight gender distinctions, which, at least in a number of figures, is otherwise visually ambiguous. Perhaps the most apt way to think of the figures is like mannequins: they acquire a gender and status identity depending on how they are dressed. Yet, to complicate matters, the different gender and status markers almost invariably appear in combinations and the individual markers of gender identity are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

### **The Empress**

The Empress from the Colleoni-Baglioni deck is a florid young woman, with blonde curls framing her round, doll-like face. (fig. 8) She is shown seated or enthroned (although no throne is visible) and wearing a voluminous golden crown which melds with the gold-leaf background and which is set atop and keeping in place a yellow veil, falling on her shoulders. The rest of the Empress' body is entirely covered in a majestic robe, blue on the inside and gold on the outside, decorated with floral motifs and the three intertwined rings, a Visconti emblem. Her feet are hidden by the folds of the dress. Her hands are covered by green gloves. With the right hand she holds a

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<sup>63</sup> Sandrina Bandera hypothesizes that artists working within the same bottega relied on sketchbooks providing them with models of figures that they could use in their works.

shield decorated with the imperial eagle, while in the left she once held a scepter, now partially erased.

The voluminosity of the robe completely conceals the Empress' anatomy, and it does not reveal anything about the limbs beneath it. The face is the only part of the Empress' body not covered by cloth. However, her essentially generic, even anodyne traits do not leave space for any kind of identification with a specific individual, highlighting that the image depicts a role, a type, but not a person. The figure's rounded face, the opulence of the clothes, together with elements clearly referring to earthly power (the shield with the imperial effigy, the three rings on the Empress' robe and the golden crown on her head, the now scratched-off scepter) constitute an ensemble of elements conveying an image of royalty and, more specifically, of female secular power.<sup>64</sup>

The figure's scale is also indicative of the importance of the Empress per se, as well as of the card within the deck. The Empress' body takes almost the entire surface of the card. The extremities of her body almost reach the card's edges, enhancing the figure's authoritativeness and importance. The Empress from the earlier Visconti di Modrone deck appears similar in form. Her doll-like face is framed by a yellow veil, her golden robe falls heavily on the woman's body, and she is holding a scepter in one hand and a shield decorated with the imperial effigy in the other. However, in this card the Empress is not alone. Rather, she is attended by four maidens in courtly attire who are all smaller in scale than the Empress. (fig. 9)

While the importance of the Colleoni Empress as a woman of power is given by the fact of being alone and taking the entire surface of the card, the status of the Visconti di Modrone Empress

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<sup>64</sup> This way of representing powerful women is common to many cards from the three Visconti decks. In the Colleoni deck, the woman appearing in The Chariot, Justice and the Queen of Cups are all dressed similarly if not identically to the Empress. At the same time, in the Visconti di Modrone deck, the two cardinal virtues Charity and Faith, the women represented in The Lover and The Chariot are all dressed like the Empress.

is, conversely, symbolized by the presence of attendants, whose reduced scale visually conveys the higher status and importance of the Empress. In fact, in the Visconti di Modrone deck, all royal figures are attended by maidens or pages, visualizing the social order that existed in the real Milanese courts themselves.<sup>65</sup>

## Queens

All four queens from the Colleoni deck are extant. Although the Queen of Wands, the Queen of Cups, the Queen of Pentacles and the Queen of Swords all share some similarities with the Empress, they also detach from the latter in the way the queens' gender identity is delivered. The Queen of Cups (fig. 10) is the one that most resembles the Colleoni Empress. She is wearing a golden dress with blue sleeves and green gloves; her anatomical features are completely concealed. Although her doll-like face is rounded and florid like the Empress', instead of looking straight in front of her she is tilting her unveiled head towards the left, directing her gaze somewhere outside the card's frame. The golden robe, the crown and the golden cup held in the queen's left hand are all uniformly melding with the background, making it difficult to distinguish the various elements. The only parts that stand out are her face, her hands and her left foot in a red slipper.

The anatomy of the other three queens' is instead much more highlighted by clothes. For example, the silver robe of the Queen of Wands gently accompanies the contours of the body parts that it covers. (fig. 11) A sash is folded right under the woman's breast. The cloth then falls gently on her rounded belly down to her laps and knees, revealing the queen's splayed legs. The silver sleeves fall to the ground as they open, leaving space to the queen's arms, which are covered by a

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<sup>65</sup> While this explicit representation of courtly hierarchy is absent from the Colleoni and Brambilla decks, the fact that the two Empresses in the Visconti di Modrone and Colleoni decks share numerous formal characteristics is a clear sign of the continuity established between decks produced by the same school in different periods.

further pair of green sleeves. Her hands are covered by red gloves: she is holding a scepter in her left and a wand in her right. From beneath the folds both feet sheathed in red-slippers are visible. The colorfulness of the queen's attire is also remarkable. Unlike the Empress or the Queen of Cups, the attire of the Queen of Wands underscores gender as much as status; rather than concealment and sublimation, the viewer is presented with an image of femininity.

The Queen of Pentacles (fig. 12) is shown in a profile and seated stance. She is wearing a blue robe decorated with a motif reminiscent of the Visconti emblem of the radiant sun.<sup>66</sup> Like the Empress and the Queen of Wands, the sleeves touch the floor, and the arms poke out. In this case the arms are covered by a second pair of red sleeves, and her hands are covered by white gloves. With one hand she is holding a big pentacle on her knee, while the other ambiguously falls between her legs, emphasizing her crotch area. Her breasts and belly are extremely pronounced. The cloth over the breasts is taut. Beneath her breasts she wears a tight sash from which her dress balloons forth over her belly. The latter is rounded as if she were in the third trimester of a pregnancy. One of her hands falling in correspondence with her pubis could also signify fertility and abundance. In this card, the queen's femininity is delivered by the way her clothes drape to reveal a fertile, biological, even traditionally earthly (earth-mother) image of female gender. The queen's full breast and round belly is perfectly appropriate as the Pentacle itself is also associated with abundance. It is probably not fortuitous that the round pentacle is placed on axis with her rounded belly.

The Queen of Swords, like the Queen of Pentacles, is seated in profile with splayed legs (fig. 13). She is wearing a plain, white robe, with a sash girding the area beneath her breasts, emphasizing the rounded shape of both her breasts and belly. Instead of wearing two pairs of

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<sup>66</sup> This emblem is also present on the Pope's robe, as well as on the King, Knight, and Page of Pentacles' livrea, and on Fortune's dress in The Wheel.

precious sleeves, the Queen of Wands is wearing armor to protect her arms and hands. With her right hand she is lifting a sword so that it rests against her shoulder; her left hand is raised in a gesture of salutation.

This figure is highly ambivalent: on the one hand, her blond hair, delicate, pale face, crown, rounded breast and belly- reveal her femininity; on the other, the iron plaques protecting her arms, and the sword were and are markers of a traditional masculinity. Although, as we will see, in the card of Justice a woman is also shown holding a sword, she is not combining female clothing with armor, as the Queen of Swords is doing. Both figures are *viragos*.<sup>67</sup> Yet, the Queen of Swords is much more ambiguous than Justice because of this combination of female and male signifiers in clothing, attributes and pose. In this context the white color of her dress should also be noted. Presumably it was meant to signify purity and by extension chastity. Together with the markers of masculinity, the Queen of Swords seems to signify austerity and rigor, a perfect oppositional complement to the pleasure and prosperity of the Queen of Pentacles.

### **Maiden-Knights**

In the Visconti di Modrone deck, there are some cards that are absent from later tarot decks. Among them are the so-called Maiden-Knights in the minor arcana. The Maiden-Knights of Wands, Swords and Pentacles are all mounted on white horses and are adorned with colorful jousting garments. (fig. 14) The maidens, like the other female figures in the deck, have blond hair and a rounded, pale face. These generic features are compensated by the richness of their clothing: the Maiden-Knight of Wands is wearing a voluminous light blue robe, richly embroidered with golden threads which help create an elaborate pattern. Similarly, the Maiden-Knight of Swords and Pentacles are wearing respectively a pale green dress with embroidered floral motifs, and a

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<sup>67</sup> Women presenting behavioral or physical characteristics usually attributed to be male prerogatives are defined as *viragos*. They are usually seen as violent and quick to anger.

dark green dress covered by a golden cloak bearing the Visconti emblem of the white dove with the motto *a bon droyt*. The three maidens also wear elaborate hair-dresses with ribbons, pearls and flower garlands.

These figures' femininity is not conveyed just through their physical appearance and clothing, but also through their palfreys, horses not deemed suitable for war and so typical for female riders, and the way they ride. Emma Herbert Davies discusses Medieval visual representations of women on horseback, specifically looking at how the way of sitting on and riding the horse, as well as the horse's type and pace defined their owner's femininity, rank and virtue. Palfreys were finely-bred and expensive horses that signified their owner and rider's status and economic wealth. The beauty, youthfulness and adornments of the horse somehow reflected the qualities and virtues of their female riders.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, palfreys were usually trained to amble, because this was considered to be the appropriate pace and speed for a woman on horse.<sup>69</sup>

According to medical treatises of the time, women were weaker than men. Although the connection is far from self-evident, riding astride (which is, with one leg on each side of the horse) was considered to be unhealthy, damaging for the "weaker sex". Therefore, in the majority of Medieval and Renaissance representations of women on horses, female riders are shown riding side saddled. Davies points out that this way of riding also had to do with female virtue and virginity, for women riding side saddled "kept their legs together." Furthermore, numerous Medieval authors refer to women riding astride as masculine and martial.<sup>70</sup> It is impossible not to

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<sup>68</sup> Emma, Herbert-Davies, *The Cultural Representation of the Horse in Late Medieval England: Status and Gender*. University of Leeds. 40.

<sup>69</sup> Davies, *The Cultural Representation of the Horse in Late Medieval England: Status and Gender*. 36.

<sup>70</sup> Davies, 42-43.



connect this medical opinion to the fact that seemingly in the majority of Medieval and Renaissance representations of women on horses, they are shown riding side-saddled.<sup>71</sup>

Aristocratic or wealthy rode horses during long journeys or during hunting parties in which they participated.<sup>72</sup> Although there are no explicit visual cues in the cards to support that these “female” riding activities are being specifically depicted, it is difficult not to assume that they, at the very least, provide the contemporary context for the depiction of the Maiden-Knights in the Visconti-Sforza decks. Indeed there are a number of North Western and North Italian late Medieval and Renaissance images of aristocratic women on horseback taking part in leisure activities such as the falconry and hunting.<sup>73</sup> Examples include the famous illumination representing the month of August in the Duke of Berry’s book of hours, as well as a miniature in an illustrated Lombard treaty on hunting and falconry. Davies convincingly argues that the patrons and artists of these depictions represented women on horseback in order to deliver a moral message on virtuous (aristocratic) female conduct.

## **The Emperor**

The Emperor in the Colleoni deck is shown as an enthroned old man. (fig. 17) His face is framed by white hair and a long, white beard falling on his chest. Instead of wearing a crown, like the Empress, the Emperor is wearing a tall fan-shaped hat bearing the Imperial eagle. His long tunic is made of the same heavy golden cloth of the Empress’ robe, with blue sleeves and the Visconti *insigna* of the three intertwined rings. The heavy golden cloth conceals the old man’s

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<sup>71</sup> This is based on an admittedly cursory examination of the visual evidence. But, again, see Emma, Herbert-Davies, *The Cultural Representation of the Horse in Late Medieval England: Status and Gender*. University of Leeds. Moreover, side-saddle riding has been deemed the proper female way of riding since at least Late Antiquity. See, e.g., Thomas Mathews, *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, 2nd. Rev. ed. Princeton University Press, 2003, 41-45.

<sup>72</sup> Davies, 37.

<sup>73</sup> Davies, 36.

body, so that his gender and age are identifiable only by the long white beard and hair. The Emperor holds a scepter and a golden sphere in his gloved hands, symbols of his secular power. Unlike the Empress, he is sitting in a three-quarter stance, and instead of looking straight in front of him he turns his eyes towards the sky, presumably a reference to the fact that the Holy Roman Emperor was thought to receive his power to rule and wisdom by God.

As we have seen in the case for the Empress and the Queen of Cups, the Emperor's golden robe, hat and sphere meld with the card's gold-leaf background, highlighting the figure's painted parts, the old man's face, hands and feet. Notwithstanding these similarities with the Empress, the Emperor's masculinity is not downplayed in any way. On the contrary, his white beard is what makes him not only visibly masculine but denotes his age and, by extension, his great wisdom, thereby justifying and legitimizing his power. This, however, contrasts with the emperors from the Brambilla or the Visconti di Modrone decks, neither of which is depicted as an old man. And, on closer examination, it seems clear that there was an "evolution" in the depiction of this figure-type. (fig. 18 and 19)

All three emperors are shown wearing the same fan-shaped hat with the Imperial eagle. But in the earlier Visconti di Modrone deck, the Emperor is a middle-aged man, with half-length hair and a short, double pointed blond beard. Instead of wearing a golden robe, he is fully armored, sitting with his legs exaggeratedly splayed, his feet crossed. He is sitting frontally and is surrounded by four pages, one of which is handing him his crown. He is holding a scepter, but no golden sphere. From the armor and the pose, it is clear that this Emperor is represented prevalently as a military man, as a *condottiero*. His wealth and status are signified by his golden hat with the Imperial eagle, the scepter, the throne he is sitting on and the four pages attending him (and the

crown). But his masculinity in this case is visualized through his relative youth, physical prowess and his military attire.

The Brambilla Emperor is a melding of the Visconti di Modrone and the Colleoni Emperors. His face, hair, beard and pose remind one of the former, while his robe, scepter and golden sphere of the latter. He is not surrounded by attendees like the Visconti di Modrone Emperor, but shown sitting alone on his throne, taking up almost the entire surface of the card. He is not a military man, like the Visconti di Modrone Emperor, but neither is he an old, wise man, like the Colleoni Emperor. Rather, the Brambilla emperor is a middle-aged man in the fullest of his physical and mental powers who is invested of imperial authority directly by God.

## **Kings**

The four Colleoni Kings are also all extant and, like the four extant Colleoni Queens, share the same physical characteristics: all have half-length, wavy, blond hair framing their plump, oval, doll-like faces. The King of Wands, the King of Pentacles and the King of Swords are wearing clothes with the same decorative patterns and colors of their royal female counterparts. Colors and heraldry are also common to all the figures (Knights and Pages included) from the same suit, thereby establishing a single “family uniform” or suit.

The King of Cups (fig. 20) is the only one sitting in profile. The other three are frontally seated, legs splayed, and feet crossed, in the same pose of the Visconti di Modrone Emperor. However, assuming the earlier deck served as a partial template, it is notable that both the costume and the physical appearance of the Colleoni kings differ from those in the Visconti di Modrone deck. For example, the King of Cups Visconti di Modrone has a short beard indicating he is older than the beardless, youthful Colleoni King of Cups. (fig. 21) He is also wearing a fan-shaped hat

that we saw was the headgear of the emperors. Yet all the kings in the Colleoni deck wear crowns. Furthermore, while the Colleoni King of Cups is wearing a short, golden tunic bordered with white cloth, the Visconti di Modrone King is wearing a long, red tunic elaborately embroidered with golden threads. In sum, the four kings from the Colleoni deck look like young men, even boys, rather than wise and powerful men, notwithstanding that their high social status is confirmed by both clothing and pose.

### **Knights and Pages**

Three knights have survived from the Colleoni deck: the Knight of Wands, the Knight of Cups, and the Knight of Swords. On the other hand, we have all four Pages. The knights are all mounted on steeds, while the pages are shown standing and holding objects for display. Knights and pages have the same homologated physical appearance and wear the same clothes: a livery and a pair of leggings with the Visconti colors and emblems for the Knights and Pages of Wands, Cups, and Pentacles, and a full armor for the knight and page of Swords. (fig. 22) However, the clothes are less magnificent than those worn by knights and pages in the Visconti di Modrone deck. For example, while the Colleoni Page of Wands is wearing a rather sober gray livery, the Visconti di Modrone Page of Wands' garments are notably rich and gorgeous, highlighting their preciousness. (fig. 23) They are of a bright blue and are decorated with elaborate embroiders in golden wire. Furthermore, the Colleoni pages are shown in profile or from behind (except the page of Swords), while the Visconti di Modrone ones are shown frontally. Finally, there is the depiction of age. In the Visconti di Modrone deck, knights and pages are shown as young, but they may hardly be characterized as children.

The Colleoni knights and pages, on the other hand, are extremely child-like: they have round, chubby faces with a mild smile, and short curly hair. This is especially evident in the Knight

of Wands, where the depiction of young age is blatant, especially because of his small size if compared to that of his mount. (fig. 24) Additionally, the knight of Wands has a chubby, child-like face, and he does not seem to exercise a full control over his galloping steed. Depictions of knights in Medieval and Renaissance have been shown to be ambiguously gendered figures.<sup>74</sup> The depiction of youthfulness was also a way to construct gender blurring in other figures (such as angels).<sup>75</sup> However, knights or even angels are never depicted as children. Again, this is exemplified in the Visconti di Modrone deck, where both knights and pages are depicted as young but not as children. In the Colleoni deck youth is exaggerated, purposefully used to establish these figures' place within the hierarchy of the game and the court culture it represented.

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<sup>74</sup> Rachel Dressler, "Crossed-legged Knights and Signification in English Medieval Tomb Sculpture". *Studies in Iconography*, vol. 21, 91-121. In this article, Dressler investigates the dynamism characterizing crossed-legged knights' tomb effigies in thirteenth century England, arguing that the dynamism of the figures reflected knights' physical prowess and valor in battle, thus becoming a reassuring emblem of knights' masculinity. Dressler compares knights' tomb effigies with those of kings, bishops, and aristocratic ladies, examining the elements that distinguished knights' tombs from those of other important characters of the time, and how such visual differences designated knights as a self-standing social order, with its own moral code and gender norms. Through a thorough examination of primary literary sources, such as Aristotle and Galen's medical treatises, Arthurian poems, and a close visual observation of the works she is examining, Dressler builds a strong, convincing argument through which she explains the ambiguity and contradiction characterizing knights' behavior in Medieval society.

<sup>75</sup> See Jacqueline Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" in Bitel, L. and Lifshitz, F. eds. *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*. 2010. 34-51 and Karl, Whittington, "Queer", *Studies in Iconography*, 33. Special Issue of journal entitled *Medieval Art History Today- Critical Terms*, Rowe, N. ed. 155-168.

## Chapter 4

The Visconti-Sforza tarot cards are in all probability collection items rather than playing cards.<sup>76</sup> The hypothesis that luxury cards could be used as playing cards by the rich North-Italian elites is not entirely to be discarded.<sup>77</sup> However, the cards' large dimensions, the elaborate and refined design of the figures, and the use of expensive materials suggests it was not the case for the Visconti-Sforza deck. The choice of providing each card with a background of gold-leaf in relief is perhaps the most telling clue, as it would have caused friction when the cards were shuffled before each game, making them impractical and potentially enervating. While the pigments and gold-leaf are scratched in some areas today, there is no doubt that the damage would have been considerably worse had they been handled with frequency and with the passion that might have characterized at least some of the more passionate players.<sup>78</sup>

Luxury cards, illuminated books, engraved boxes and other precious objects now referred to with the French word *jouyeux* (joyful; providing joy), were usually collected by and exchanged among members of the aristocracy. As Clark explains, luxury objects were meant to display their commissioner and owner's economic wealth, artistic taste and knowledge resulting from their

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<sup>76</sup> Mulazzani, *I Tarocchi Viscontei e Bonifacio Bembo. Il Mazzo di Yale*. p. 90; Moakley, *The Tarot Cards Painted by Bonifacio Bembo for the Visconti and Sforza Family. An Iconographic and Historical Study*. 20.

<sup>77</sup> Robin, O'Bryen, "Cultures of Play, 1300-1700", *Games and Game Playing in European Art and Literature, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. Amsterdam University Press. 26 -29.

<sup>78</sup> The so-called *Foglio di Tarocchi* of c. 1500 held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, shows how common and functional playing cards could be obtained rather easily and inexpensively. Woodcuts of the whole deck were made to fit on a single sheet of cardboard. Each card is provided with a rectangular frame within which the figures are rendered in black ink contour lines, the only colors are a red wash mostly for garments and a brownish wash for other details. The figures lack the Visconti-Sforza's minute details, chromatic variety and exquisite taste. The *Foglio di Tarocchi* indirectly attests that playing cards were produced even of few means, a trend that increased with the introduction of print-making and faster modes of series production. This is not to suggest that the elites also made use of less expensive woodcut cards, but it was certainly an option.

elevated social rank.<sup>79</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that the Visconti-Sforza cards were meant to be admired within the private space of their owner's *studiolo* by a restricted number of illustrious guests. It is also not difficult to imagine that they traveled with their owner and his or her court. Clark highlights the exceptional mobility of 15<sup>th</sup> century luxury objects, which were moved from place to place according to the court's own movements. Such objects also changed owners, often more than once. Last but not least, luxury objects were reproduced or copied in both the original medium and in other media by various artists.<sup>80</sup> One of Clark's most compelling arguments is that luxury objects, playing cards included, functioned as agents in shaping courtly relations and reflecting the court's values and structure through association, repetition and exchange.<sup>81</sup> I believe this is also the case for the Visconti-Sforza tarot cards and for playing cards in general, for one of their main functions was undoubtedly that of educating viewers/players on their own position within the courtly hierarchical system.

In this context, it is also crucial to emphasize a slightly different function of *joyeux*, namely, that they were used as liquid capital, becoming the fulcrum of important socio-economic transactions.<sup>82</sup> First and foremost was the practice of gift giving and exchange a crucial part of the intricate diplomatic relations and connections between powerful courts. The offering of a precious gift could help seal a powerful political and economic alliance.

The way the Visconti-Sforza decks were specifically displayed (whether by their original patrons or others), however, remains partially unclear. At the top of each card from the Colleoni-Baglioni deck is a small hole. Moakley believes that the holes are a modern addition and have

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<sup>79</sup> Leah R. Clark, *Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court. Objects and Exchanges*. Cambridge University Press. 2018. 1-3.

<sup>80</sup> Clark, *Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court. Objects and Exchanges*. 1-4.

<sup>81</sup> Clark, 4-5.

<sup>82</sup> Clark. Also see Chapter 3 on clothes in this thesis.

nothing to do with the way they were originally displayed.<sup>83</sup> Mulazzani and Bandera, on the other hand, argue that the small holes indicate that the cards were probably meant to hang either from a wall or from festoons.<sup>84</sup> Hanging the cards was certainly an excellent solution since their large size made it possible to appreciate their beauty and preciousness even from a relative distance. Another interesting option is that the cards were kept together by a ribbon going through the holes. This solution would make it harder to lose individual cards, while allowing viewers to admire them as if they were a book.

While the dating of the holes obviously problematizes speculating on their display, it is also the case that we have no clear evidence regarding how they were stored when not on display, or when traveling from place to place. We know that the cards currently belonging to the Morgan Library are kept in a casket made of calfskin decorated with Arthurian motives.<sup>85</sup> The connection between 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century objects decorated with chivalric themes and the imagery of luxury cards is worthy of a deeper investigation, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that there are strong connections between the iconography of the cards and that of the casket: both are products of the courtly environment within which they were enjoyed and exchanged. Moreover, it seems perfectly reasonable to assume that luxury tarot cards were kept in luxury boxes, since the function of the latter complements the function of the former.

The three Visconti-Sforza decks have been associated with illuminated secular and religious manuscripts, and in particular by those commissioned by members of the two families between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The association is based on both technical and stylistic

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<sup>83</sup> Moakley, *The Tarot Cards Painted by Bonifacio Bembo for the Visconti and Sforza Family. An Iconographic and Historical Study*. 22.

<sup>84</sup> Mulazzani, *I Tarocchi Viscontei e Bonifacio Bembo. Il Mazzo di Yale*. 90.

<sup>85</sup> Moakley, 22.



grounds. It should go without saying that both cards and manuscripts share similar decorative and material techniques.<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Alexander, also observes that the Visconti-Sforza tarot cards are a wonderful example of 15<sup>th</sup> century Lombard miniature production, that they perfectly embody the main characteristics of the International Gothic style that was greatly in vogue among the Northern Italian courts and their North-Western European counterparts.<sup>87</sup> He specifically calls attention to the similarities between the cards and the illuminated Arthurian codex entitled *La Tavola Rotonda* attributed to Bembo. Although he does not pronounce himself in terms of attribution, he does highlight that 15<sup>th</sup> century Lombard artists such as Bembo were very versatile and skilled in adapting to different media and visual contexts. For example, many were commissioned and produced large frescoes and majestic altarpieces, as well as illuminated manuscripts for private devotion and leisure.<sup>88</sup>

The Visconti-Sforza tarot decks may also be compared to other Italian and European card decks whose figural representations also depict courtly figures. The *Ambraser Hofsamterspiel* (The Courtly Household Cards) is a deck of playing cards from late 14<sup>th</sup> early 15<sup>th</sup> century Austria. As Raid has shown, and as explained in Chapter 3, in this deck the figures' clothing and gender reflect their position and role within the court.<sup>89</sup> She also argues that the card games themselves were representatives or reflected the hierarchical structure of the contemporary system operating in the Austrian court, thereby reinforcing and strengthening feudal values in the players' minds.<sup>90</sup> As Raid puts it, "without hierarchy, no card games – without hierarchy, no court".<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> However, most manuscripts were made of parchment, while the cards were made of cardboard.

<sup>87</sup> Jonathan J. G., Alexander, *La Miniatura Italiana del Rinascimento, 1450-1600*. Giulio Einaudi Editore. 2020. 183.

<sup>88</sup> Alexander, *La Miniatura Italiana del Rinascimento, 1450-1600*. 184-186.

<sup>89</sup> Raid, "The Ambraser Hofsamterspiel: Playing Cards as a Visual Source for Courtly Life during the Late Middle Ages". 451.

<sup>90</sup> Raid, 453-455.

<sup>91</sup> Raid, 456.

## The Game of Tarot

While, as discussed above, the Visconti-Sforza decks were probably mostly for display, their significance may not be separated from the functions that less prestigious decks fulfilled. The game of tarot was a trick-taking game seemingly inspired by Indian and Persian games (see Introduction). Although the matrix of tarots is oriental the introduction of triumphs- or trumps- is European.<sup>92</sup> Before becoming a game with fixed rules, there were many, as briefly discussed in Chapter 1, variations of the game of tarot in different Italian cities. Bologna, Ferrara, Urbino and Milan are known for being the first cities in which tarot decks were produced and played. Each city had its own version of the game - in Bologna tarot games are still played and they remained unvaried from the original game; Florence was known for the game of *minchiate* played with thirty-five numbered triumphs and six unnumbered cards, and so on - which also affected the structure of the deck, the numbers of cards and their order.<sup>93</sup>

In the game of tarot, triumphs serve as permanent trumps, except for the Fool. Players have to follow suit and are obliged to play a triumph when possible. The Fool makes an exception, because it cannot be used to take the other players' cards and can be played regardless of the obligations concerning suit or trump. A player scores a point by playing tricks and by taking other players' cards with tricks.<sup>94</sup> In this case, the court cards carry extra points. The Page carries one, the Knight carries two, the Queen carries 3 and the King carries 4. The points carried to each of

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<sup>92</sup> Dummett, *The Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards*. 2-3.

<sup>93</sup> Moakley, *The Tarot Cards Painted by Bonifacio Bembo for the Visconti and Sforza Family. An Iconographic and Historical Study*. 46; Dummett, 5-6.

<sup>94</sup> Tricks are the hands played by each player during a game. They usually consist in throwing a card instead of another, according to the player's strategy. In the game of tarot as described by Dummett, with tricks players usually try to take the other players' cards.

these cards are to be added to the original one point carried by the trick. The lower and higher trumps, as well as the Fool also carry additional points.<sup>95</sup>

During the game, the value of each card is determined by the gender, age and status of the figure represented on it. This is particularly evident with the cards of honor, where the page carries the lowest value, and is surpassed by the knight. The queen is superior to both page and knight, because although she is a woman, she covers a privileged position achieved through marriage or by birth. However, the highest card is the king, a male figure of power submitting all the other figures. If a deck presents more female figures, as it is the case for the Visconti di Modrone deck, then those female figures will carry less value than their male counterparts. So, for example, the maiden will be the lowest card in that it is inferior to the page, while the maiden-knight will be superior to the page but inferior to the knight.

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the game of tarot spread all over Europe, and the tarot deck experienced some variations. In France the original suits were changed to clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades, while in Germany they were substituted by hearts, rattles, leaves, and acorns. Additionally, some German cards carried suits like stags, lions, liocorns, herons, and so on.<sup>96</sup> This is the case of two tarot decks, today respectively in Stuttgart and Vienna.<sup>97</sup>

According to Dummett, tarot cards were only used as playing cards, and they were attributed a divinatory function only in 18<sup>th</sup> century France. Dummett argues that although we have an incredible number of sources dating back to the late Middle Ages about the use of playing cards and, specifically, of triumphs, such sources are only concerned with the function cards had as a game of chance. Triumphs are frequently mentioned in sermons given by Dominican monks, who

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<sup>95</sup> Dummett, 4-5.

<sup>96</sup> Mandel, *I Tarocchi dei Visconti*. 8-9.

<sup>97</sup> Mulazzani, *I Tarocchi Viscontei e Bonifacio Bembo. Il Mazzo di Yale*.

despise the games of dice and triumph alleging that they corrupt the soul. In Dummett's opinion, if triumphs were used as a divinatory instrument, vehement Dominican predictors would have certainly not failed to mention it. Lastly, Dummett criticizes the way in which fortune tellers and masons have attributed meaning to the triumphs - or, as they were renamed from the 1700 on, Major Arcana- by considering each card individually. Dummett believes that triumphs only acquire meaning when in relation to one another during the game.<sup>98</sup>

However, to drastically exclude the influence exercised by late Medieval esoteric disciplines on tarot cards would be a mistake. Esoterism was an integral part of late Medieval and Renaissance culture. Neoplatonic theories, astrology, alchemy and divination were regularly studied and practiced by the elites. New scholarly research has focused on the role astrology had in shaping politics in Renaissance Italy. There is clear evidence of a correspondence between members of the Sforza family with authoritative astrologers like da Camera, who would provide the Milanese *condottiero* Francesco Sforza with political advice on when to sign a treaty, when to go to war, and when to look out for his own safety.<sup>99</sup> Bianca Maria Visconti, Francesco's wife, engaged in a frequent correspondence with the physician and astrologer Antonio Bernareggi, who was already an eminent figure at Filippo Maria Visconti (Bianca Maria's father) court.<sup>100</sup> Knowing that the Sforza and their Visconti predecessors heavily relied on astrology allows scholars to believe that astrological and alchemical knowledge would easily influence the artistic production of their courts as it did with their lives.

Hence, the invention and iconography of triumphs cannot be studied separately from the customs of North Italian Renaissance courts. If triumphs derive from the secular cars that strolled

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<sup>98</sup> Carlo, Penco, *Dummett and the Game of Tarot*. Teorema, Vol. XXXII/1. 2013. 144-148.

<sup>99</sup> Monica, Azzolini, *The Duke and the Stars: Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Milan*. Harvard University Press, 2013. 65-72.

<sup>100</sup> Azzolini, *The Duke and the Stars: Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Milan*. 80.

in the city streets during Carnival, in the goliardic attempt of staging Petrarch's *Triumphs*, it would not be inappropriate nor misleading to think that the esoteric aspects of Renaissance culture contributed as well to the origins and iconography of triumphs. Providing a reasonable solution to this dilemma, Penco suggests that scholars should distinguish between the influence Esoteric Renaissance culture exercised in the way images were conceived, and the roles cards covered in relation to one another within the game.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Penco, *Dummett and the Game of Tarot*. 151-152.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis' purpose is demonstrating that through an iconographic observation of the Visconti-Sforza tarot cards it is possible to understand the hierarchic structure and complex interactions that shaped courtly life in Renaissance Italy. Gender and wealth certainly played a central role in establishing social hierarchy, which in the case of the Visconti-Sforza tarot cards is determined by the clothes the figures are wearing. The study of luxury objects, such as these cards, also provides essential information about the way in which social, political and economic bonds among individuals and/or families were stipulated by means of an intricate and elaborate process of gift exchange. Precious objects such as luxury cards, illuminated manuscripts, jewels and ivory caskets deserve a close art historical observation. Indeed, their contribution to the field of art history and to the study of social evolution is of great importance, which is why they should not be overlooked.

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## Images



Fig. 1 The Ten of Swords. Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Image found on [www.themorgan.org](http://www.themorgan.org)



Fig. 2 The World, Visconti di Modrone deck, ca. 1442-1447, 189x90 mm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Wikipedia





Fig. 3 The Lover, Visconti di Modrone deck, ca. 1442-1447, 189x90 mm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.  
[www.tarot-heritage.com](http://www.tarot-heritage.com)



Fig. 4 Two of Coins, Visconti di Modrone deck, ca. 1442-1447, 189x90 mm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.  
 Wikipedia



Fig. 5 The Popess, Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.  
Wikipedia



Fig. 6 The Hanged Man, Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.  
Wikipedia





Fig. 7 The Empress, Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Pinterest.



Fig. 8 The Empress, Visconti di Modrone deck, ca. 1442-1447, 189x90 mm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. [www.tarotmysterium.com](http://www.tarotmysterium.com)



Fig. 9 Queen of Cups, Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.  
[www.themorgan.org](http://www.themorgan.org)



Fig. 10 Queen of Wands, Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.  
[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)





Fig. 11 Queen of Coins,  
Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca.  
1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont  
Morgan Library, New York.  
[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)



Fig. 12 Queen of Swords, Colleoni-  
Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm,  
Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.  
[www.themorgan.com](http://www.themorgan.com)



Fig. 13 Maiden-Knight of Swords, Visconti di Modrone deck, ca. 1442-1447, 189x90 mm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.  
[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)



Fig. 14 Emperor, Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.  
 Wikipedia





Fig. 15 Emperor, Visconti di Modrone deck, ca. 1442-1447, 189x90 mm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.  
Wikipedia



Fig. 16 Emperor, Brambilla deck, ca. 1463, 180x90 mm, Pinacoteca di Brera.  
[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)



Fig. 17 King of Cups, Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.  
www.pinterest.com



Fig. 18 King of Cups, Visconti di Modrone deck, ca. 1442-1447, 189x90 mm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.  
Wikipedia





Fig. 19 Page of Wands, Visconti di Modrone deck, ca. 1442-1447, 189x90 mm, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.  
[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

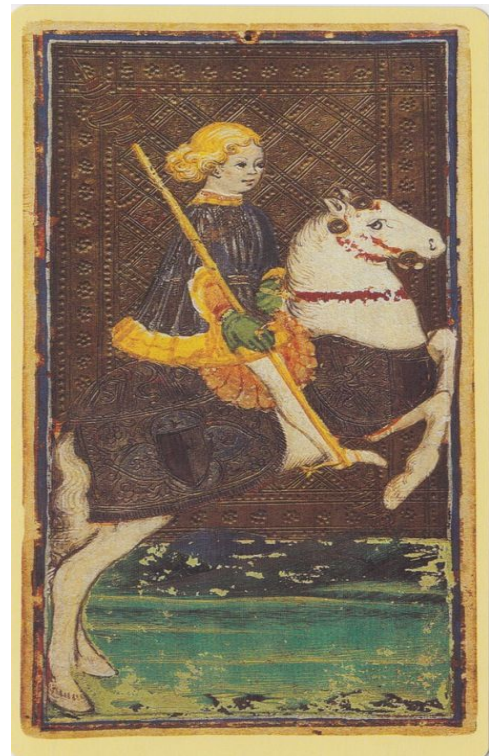


Fig. 20 Knight of Wands, Colleoni-Baglioni deck, ca. 1450, 173x87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.  
[www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)

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