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Chromatic Veil Tarot: Reimagining the Rider-Waite-Smith Deck Through Modern Tools and Technology

When it comes to the world of playing cards, Tarot is a type that gains the attention of both the curious and skeptical. Tarot cards are a deck of seventy-eight cards traditionally used for divination, reflection, and playing games. The layout of these cards can be described as a deck of regular French-suited cards, with the addition of a fifth suit. This additional suit is known as the Triumph Suit, Trump Suit, and later, the Major Arcana. In the Rider-Waite-Smith system of Tarot, there are twenty-two cards in the Major Arcana numbered zero to twenty-one. The Pip cards, later known as the Minor Arcana, are similar to French-suited but instead of Clubs, Hearts, Spades, and Diamonds, they are labeled as Wands, Cups, Swords, and Pentacles, respectively. Tarot has a theorized early history with claims that go as far back as ancient China, India, and fifteenth-century Egypt. Though, concrete records of decks that contain a fifth suit do not show up until around fifteenth-century Italy, with concrete depictions in France right before the French Revolution in 1789. With the rise of occult groups soon after, Tarot began to be used as an indoctrination tool- particularly by The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Arthur E. Waite would go on to envision his own interpretation of Tarot, commission Pamela Colman Smith to illustrate, and publish his deck through Rider & Son Publishing. This depiction of Tarot would grow to be one of the most common systems used, including during the creation of Chromatic Veil Tarot. Overall, designing this deck took just shy of a year to complete, starting April 14,

2024, and ending April 4th, 2025. The project can be divided into three parts: designing the Major Arcana, the Minor Arcana, and efficiently printing the whole deck. The Major Arcana takes inspiration from scratch art and limited forms of expression. Meanwhile, the Minor Arcana is based on the four elements, fire, water, air, and earth, with each suit forming a panoramic image once all the cards are placed side by side. Both halves of the deck made use of clipping masks in a variety of ways. As the decks were being drafted, a variety of printing tests were done, including the possible idea of screen printing the backsides of the cards. Ultimately, a company that specializes in prototyping decks of cards, Make Playing Cards, printed the final deck. In the end, Chromatic Veil Tarot aims to tap into childlike artistic expression while doing the themes of Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot justice. It is not a perfect replica of that system but instead views Smith's work through another lens. Taking on a large project such as this teaches time management, color consistency, working with style constraints, taking peer feedback, and thinking outside the box to make the project easier to handle with one person.

The exact origin of Tarot is long debated and unclear. In the article *The Origins and Evolution of Tarot* by John F. Nash, he discusses the possibility that Tarot has a Chinese origin. In nineteenth-century China, decks of twenty-two black-and-white playing cards were common. These cards were often printed onto carved wooden blocks, though nicer depictions were commissioned by those of higher wealth. These cards were either used as a platform to play games or as 'play money' for other games. From there, the cards and games that came with them spread westward into Europe. This theory makes sense as Italian cities such as Venice had



Figure 1: "Dashavatara Ganjifa." (Map Academy)

India as a possible origin, as a popular game called *Ganjifa*- example in Figure 1- was distributed. The cards were round and made of either wood or cloth that was lacquered and later painted. There were twelve cards with one court card that had different depictions of the Hindu god Visnu for each of the ten suits. These suits were titled fish, tortoises, boars, lions, water jugs, axes, arrows, quails, shells, and swords—much different than what is used in modern decks.

Another interesting factor is Indian depictions of the androgenous Hindu god Ardhanarishvara, who is often depicted holding a cup, scepter, sword, or ring. An artist who goes by Jayarts online carved the depiction of Ardhanarishvara in Figure 2. As familiar as these symbols are, no Indian playing deck that later reached Europe features these symbols. Farley discusses a particular hole in this



Figure 2: Ardhanarishvara – A Composite Deity of Shiva and Shakti | 19" Brass Statue (Jay Arts).

theory based on already existing European decks. In the British Museum, a Ganjifa pack shared two suites with Latin playing cards and each suit had court cards similar to French-Suited decks. However, the late manufacturing date suggests that European decks influenced this particular

established Chinese trade routes where the cards could have made their way over. These decks are relatively similar to modern playing cards with three to four suits numbered one through nine. However, these decks lacked any form of court card (Nash 69). In Helen Farley's book *A Cultural History of Tarot*, she points to



Figure 3: Seven of Swords
(Nash 70).

pack of Ganjifa instead of the theorized Indian influence (Farley 10). This displacement of manufacturing dates makes any theory of origin from India improbable. Farley delves into the more popular and later commonly acclaimed Egyptian origin for Tarot cards. In 1939, archaeologist L.A. Mayer came across a deck in what was once the Egyptian Mamluk Empire that dated back to the fifteenth-century, the Seven of Swords shown in Figure 3. There were fifty-two cards in total, though five were clearly from another deck. They were similar to previously mentioned decks using four suits with ten numeric cards and one court card. These suits included swords, polo sticks, cups, and coins—much closer to what is in a modern Tarot deck (Farley 13).

While these theories are fascinating to pick apart, they are all missing one critical part of the modern Tarot deck. These all could point to the creation of the Minor Arcana that replicates French-suited decks that include Hearts, Spades, Clubs, and Diamonds. However, the Trump suit, later known as the Major Arcana, is what makes a Tarot deck. In fifteenth-century Italy, the painter Michalino Molinari Da Besozzo was commissioned to paint a card deck that starts to resemble modern Tarot. It included the four suits featuring different types of birds and a fifth suit with imagery of various Greek Gods. Unfortunately, the only record of these cards' existence is through a letter sent by Venetian military captain, Jacopo Antonio Marcello. He had sent the deck as a gift and made mention of it through an accompanied letter, though the deck was never recovered (Nash 77). This shows that there were ideas for the fifth suit floating around before the deck reached France, where it would later gain popularity. Though these were small commissions that did not have an impact, nor did the full decks survive long enough to be historically

preserved. Farley goes into detail about a deck that floated around the court of Milan, Italy, during the sixteenth century. This deck was supposed to be painted by Bonifacio Bembo and only about twenty decks survived in various conditions. The oldest deck belonged to the House of Visconti di Modrone and contained eleven Trump cards and four suits of Coins, Swords, Cups, and Batons. These Trump cards have some names that carry over to newer systems, such as The Fool- Figure 4, The Empress, The Emperor, Love, The Chariot, and Death (Farley 83). This is far closer to what modern Tarot looks like with Coins, Swords, Cups, as well as a handful of cards from the Major Arcana pulling through. The Batons are not far from Wands as both are depicted as sticks of varying sizes.



Figure 4: The Fool from House of Visconti di Modrone (Farley 83).

By the seventeenth century, the cards made their way over to France when various artists began creating their own interpretations of the cards. The first of which was published by Jean Noblet, followed by Francois Chosson, Jean Dodalm, and Nicolas Conver between 1650 and 1760 (Nash 71). This sparked a boom of popularity in Italy, France, and various parts of Europe. The French Revolution would soon begin in 1789 and last until 1799. During this time of unpredictability, a new form of organization arose. In his article *A Sociology of Tarot*, Mike Sosteric picks apart the why behind occult interpretations of Tarot and how those ideas came to be. During the revolution, the divide between nobility and commoners began to merge. Freemasonry was coined as a term for groups formed out of hierarchies and exclusions, meant to uplift unequal power relations and male hegemony. The places these people would meet in were called lodges, they were created to provide the skills necessary for capitalism to develop. At first,

these lodges were used by those of the lower to middle class to develop self-discipline, reliability, loyalty, and subservience. Nobles even entered these areas to transition from their old leadership to a life more in line with the people below them. This created a group of people who felt exclusive to each other and the first emergence of secret societies. One such leader of these groups, a priest and freemason known as Antoine Court de Gebelin, began pointing to Tarot as a source of the mystical and astrological. From there, Tarot was seen as an indoctrination tool for these societies. Sosteric refers to these initiations and the use of Tarot as a form of propaganda, manipulating initiates through their emotions and coaxing them into a cult belief (Sosteric 366-369). Tarot played a role in escalating the freemason lodges from places of capitalistic transition to an alteration of religious expression. During a time of uncertainty, social change, and governmental collapse, it made sense that people felt drawn to groups where they felt in control and welcomed. Tarot was a physical medium chosen to make this transition into the occult more appealing.

From there, secret societies spread through Western Europe, teaching their own ideologies and practices. For some, Tarot was never mentioned, but multiple societies made it the core of their identity. Farley delves into the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn as one such group that specifically used an Egyptian myth known as *The Book of Thoth* to back their claims. The myth was seen as safeguarded secrets brought to Europe from Egypt, encoded in a card game that would be later deciphered when the time is right. De Gebelin appointed this honor to himself, though he never went through with it. This hypothesis would later be disproved for a few reasons, the main one simply being that there is no concrete evidence of Tarot in Egypt. The second one being that if Tarot was brought to Europe by the Egyptians, one would expect Egyptian imagery to be found on Italian decks- Though there is none (Farley 19-21). One

member of the Golden Dawn, Arthur E. Waite, took to designing his deck with the help of the Willian Rider & Son publishing company. He commissioned Pamela Colman Smith to illustrate the deck. *Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic Account* is a book written by Elisabeth Foley O'Connor that aims to dive into Colman Smith's work on the Rider-Waite deck and other projects. She was also a member of the Golden Dawn and met Waite through the group. The project took about two years to illustrate and was done through lithography- a printing technique that utilizes the immiscibility of oil and water on stone or metal to create an image. O'Connor summarizes some of Waite's record of the project. Using his own research, Waite was particular about small details Colman Smith would illustrate into the card. This was to the point where his records used terms such as 'spoon feeding' to describe their work together. He was firm in the belief that this was solely his vision to share with the world, and he was the only one who could give voice to the symbols within the deck (O'Connor 175-177). It did not seem like Waite had much respect for Colman Smith or was clouded by his own vision. Once the deck was finished in 1909, Waite would go on to publish it under his own name and the publishing company- hence the name Rider-Waite Tarot. Though he leaves Colman Smith out of the title, and only mentions her in copyright formalities. Colman Smith left her signature on every card of the deck, so there is no mistaking it for anyone else's work. This deck became incredibly popular through the 1900s and into the 2000s. Of course, those occult groups still exist in varying degrees of functionality. Though recent movements aim to use Tarot not just for divination and spiritual practice, but for artistic expression and personal reflection as well. In the modern day, it is common to see Colman's name included in publications of the deck, now known as the Rider-Waite-Smith deck.

Designing Chromatic Veil Tarot was a daunting task when the project started. The first goal was to choose a style that was relatively easy to replicate but was unique in its own right. One place of inspiration came from Masa Kuzuki's Tarot deck *Silhouette Tarot: Third Addition*, also based on Rider-Waite-Smith. His creation is primarily made up of black silhouettes that



Figure 5: Temperance from *Silhouette Tarot* (Kuzuki).

overshadow vibrant and colorful backgrounds. He makes excellent use of overlaying different opacities of black to create more depth within the designs. A good example of this is Temperance, Figure 5, where the main form is black at 100% opacity while the smaller details and plants are made up of shapes at 50% opacity. It also helps that the background has lighter and darker shades built within to make a visually engaging image. Though there are small areas of visual tension where two objects within an image are too close or barely touching- this draws the eye into unintended areas and can become distracting. In this card in particular, the woman's elbow is flush against her wing, as well as her hands and hair that are against the vines behind her. Though there are times when one can get away with this as a design choice. Kuzuki's *Silhouette Tarot* takes inspiration from paper cutouts, so it would make sense that these elements would be attached. It all depends on the intended look and feel of the work. It is believed the goal of Kuzuki's work was to create a sense of childhood whimsy, which is where the main inspiration for Chromatic Veil Tarot comes from.

The style choices come from the methodology behind the linework and the main rules in facial structure.

Understanding clipping masks, also known as alpha locks, is important for understanding how Chromatic Veil Tarot was designed. Each card was illustrated using Krita, an open-source drawing program comparable to Adobe's Photoshop. In Krita and other similar programs, groups

can be made with the commands Control + Shift + G to essentially put a group of layers into a folder. This folder can be manipulated as its own object. In Figure 6, there are three red circles, each one has a blue circle on top. The circle on the left simply has both circles on

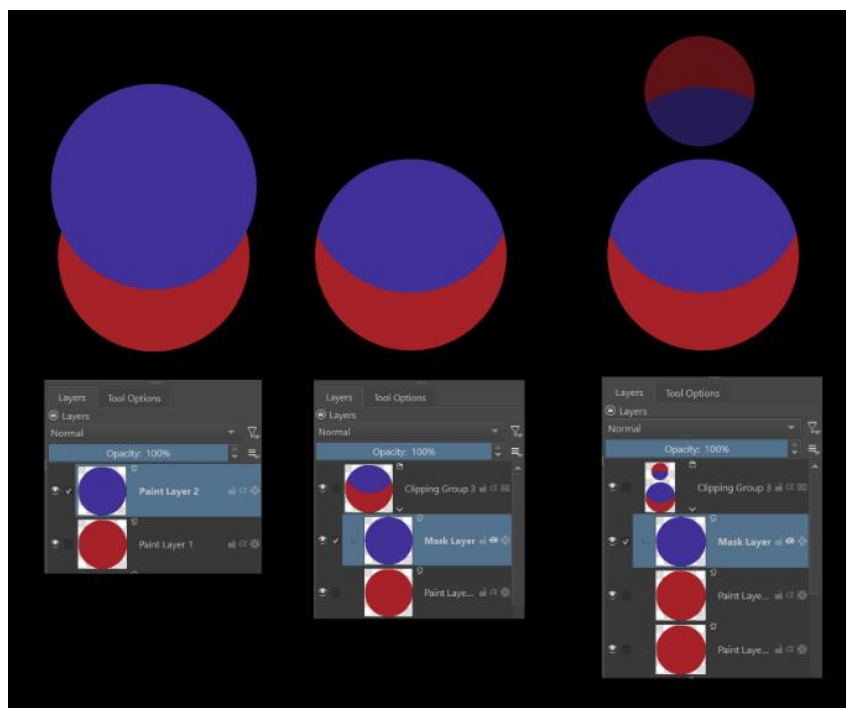


Figure 6: Masking Layers Example.

two separate layers, no grouping or object interaction is happening. The circle in the middle is grouped together with a clipping mask turned on. In the layer for the blue circle, there is a small *a* on the right-hand side. When this *a* is selected, that object ‘clips’ to any object below it within the group. In the right set of circles, the blue circle is able to clip onto multiple objects below it within the group. When the layers are separate from each other, they can be manipulated and

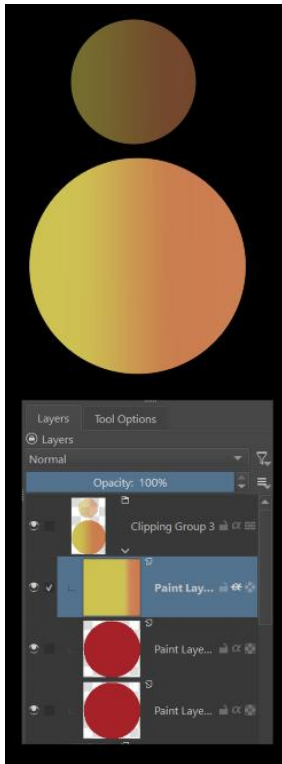


Figure 7: Gradient Example.

have effects applied separately. Apply a gradient instead of a blue circle to the clipping layer, and the way the Major Arcana of Chromatic Veil Tarot was illustrated begins to shine through- as seen in Figure 7. This is how the figures within the Major Arcana were illustrated- One large clipping mask with multiple layers of varying opacity overtop a solid black background.

Two books that are important to note as far as the interpretations of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck are *The Tarot Revealed* by Eden Gray and *The New Tarot Handbook* by Rachel Pollack. Pollack is a poet, novelist, and interpreter of Tarot cards- having written over thirty books on the topic. She was inspired by Eden Gray, the first person to coin the term

‘Fool’s Journey’ when describing Tarot during her own studies on the topic. This was the starting point for interpreting designs for Chromatic Veil Tarot. A good example of how Rachel’s work was used to reference some of the imagery is in The Magician.

In her section discussing the card’s imagery, she writes “He stands in a bower of life, surrounded by red roses (for passion) and white lilies (for purity). The same two colors appear in his robes, the red of desire cloaking the white of pure intention and power without selfishness” (Pollack 18). This influenced the design elements, pose, expression, and colors that were utilized in The Magician, Figure 8. Pollack mentions the roses and lilies surrounding the figure of course, but also an interpretation of their colors. Passion versus purity, perhaps a

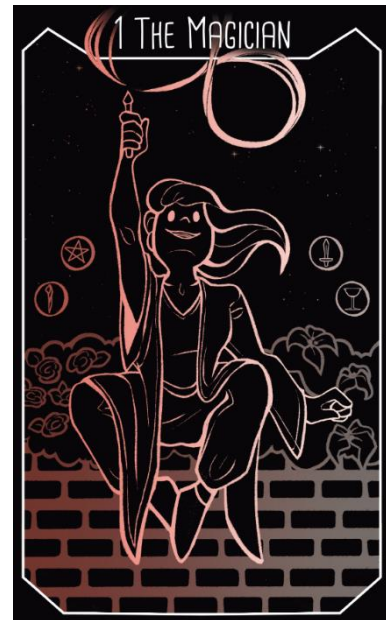


Figure 8: The Magician from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Final.

balance must be struck between the two. There is a sense of joy and inspiration in Chromatic Veil Tarot's interpretation of The Magician, but there is also a sense of control and confidence in their body language. Pollock's work proved to be an incredible source of information while designing both the major and Minor Arcana.

Between the months of September and December 2024, the priority was searching for background information and drafting each card. Both the major and Minor Arcana proved to be challenges that took up time, but the Major Arcana is where Chromatic Veil Tarot stands out.

The drafting process consisted of time reading *The New Tarot Handbook* and *The Tarot*

Revealed, and illustrating those interpretations with a personal twist to each card. The Major

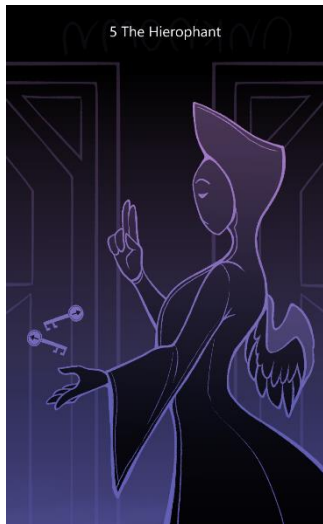


Figure 9: The Hierophant from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Draft.



Figure 10: The Hierophant from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Final.

Arcana's draft had much brighter colors as seen in Figure 9. Though this posed an issue when they were put alongside the Minor Arcana, those drafts had more muted colors and were already stylistically different. This created a disconnect between the two sides of the deck. The solution was to pull the

colors closer to a middle ground; lighten and

desaturate the colors of the Major Arcana while brightening the colors of the Minor Arcana. The color palette of the Minor Arcana was also expanded to include a wider variety of colors that were directly used on the Major Arcana. This brought the two sides closer together and made them feel like they were part of the same deck.

By January 2025, the drafts were completed. The next step was to have other people look at the cards and give feedback. This varied between showing the cards off during conversation

and getting a small group of people together to look at the deck. This is where the idea of having elements of the designs break out from the borders came from. There was other areas that, of course, had to be changed. One

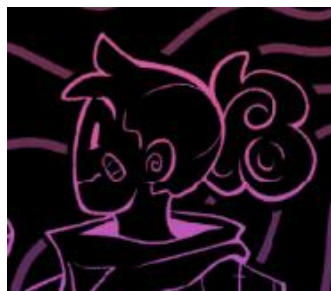


Figure 11: The Fool from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Draft.

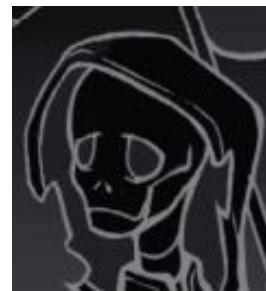


Figure 12: Death from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Draft.

stylistic choice that was later scrapped was that the figures in Chromatic Veil Tarot wouldn't have noses. The idea was to emulate toys and present a challenge in defining a character's expression. In Figure 11, an early draft of The Fool, their face is flat, and their eyes are lines. This was an intentional design choice that was carried out through most of the drafting process. Though during peer critique, it was pointed out that in Death, Figure 12, the skeleton has holes where a nose once was, which was inconsistent. This was the last push to go through the cards and give the faces noses, much to the benefit of the designs. There were a few cards that were completely scrapped and redone in favor of a clearer design. One example is Strength, a card that had composition issues during the draft. In Figure 13, there is no clear direction the image is

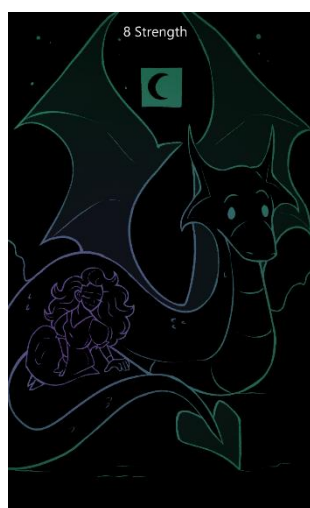


Figure 13: Strength from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Draft.



Figure 14: Strength from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Final.

trying to lead the eye through. A stylistic choice to put the moon in a solid block of color at most drew that eye away from the subject of the image. The colors also did no favors as the purple was far too dark, and the woman got lost. In comparison to the other cards, it was too open a composition and stuck out because of it. It was decided that there was not much

that could be done to have the same composition and have it sat nicely with the other cards, so

the design was scrapped. What later came of Strength was a more focused composition that leads the eye from the dragon to the woman and vice versa, Figure 14.

The next area of interest was the Minor Arcana, fifty-six illustrations. This was a daunting part of the project just by the sheer amount cards. Though a work around was found that made creation of



Figure 13: Seven - Ten of Swords from *Prisma Visions* (Eads).

this side of the deck easier. *Prisma Vision Tarot* by James R. Eads is a beautiful deck full of detail. His Minor Arcana, each suit based on the four seasons, is comprised of panoramic images. When each card of a suit is put side-by-side, they create one cohesive image. See the Seven through Ten of Swords in Figure 15 (Eads, 2022). One thing that is interesting about these cards is that the swords are not depicted on each card as one may think. On the Nine of Swords, it does not look like there are any swords- that is, until the nine sharp teeth in the bird's mouth are noticed. Ideas like this are what make *Prisma Visions* a personal favorite deck to draw inspiration from. The concept of each suit making up a panoramic image turned the Major Arcana from fifty-six files to four files. The only drawback is that these files were over 11,000 pixels wide; once multiple clipping masks were introduced, it was a common occurrence for Krita to lag or occasionally crash. The best solution was to have patience and configure Krita to auto-save more often.

Each suit of the Minor Arcana is based on each of the four elements- fire for Wands, water for Cups, air for Swords, and earth for Pentacles. In interpretations of Tarot, it is common to associate the four suits with the elements, the cardinal directions, or the zodiacs. (Gray, 1969) On the bottom half of the entire suit, the element is flowing from card to card while white



Figure 14: Six of Cups from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Final.



Figure 15: Queen of Pentacles from Chromatic Veil Tarot, Final.

outlines of various symbols float above. The only exception is the pentacles, where the coins are gold. In certain scenarios, particularly the cups, the element would interact with the objects above it. The figures in the court cards, containing the Page, Knight, Queen, and King of their respective suit, would be made up of the element their suit is focused on. Both these rules

are shown in Figures 16 and 17, respectively.

The biggest change that had to be made to the Minor Arcana was, as mentioned earlier, the colors. In order to make the major and Minor Arcana look like they are part of the same deck, the colors from the Minor Arcana would be pulled over to the major. The only issue is that the drafts of the Minor Arcana had a limiting palette. Primarily greens, blues, and purples, with the occasional yellow. It was not enough to cover the variation the Major Arcana needed. As a solution, the Minor Arcana would take on a different dominant color per suit- red for Wands, blue for Cups, green for Swords, and purple for Pentacles. Then have a secondary color complementary to their primary- complementary being two colors directly opposite on the color wheel. A comparison of the two-color

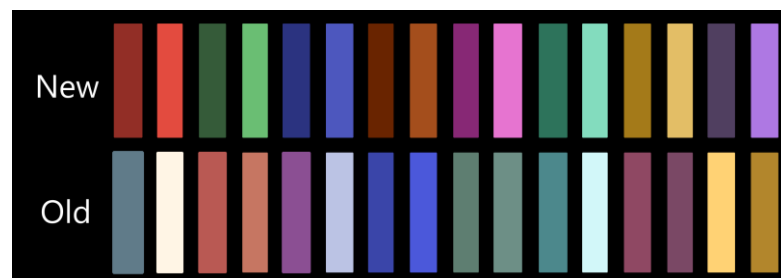


Figure 16: Minor Arcana Color Palette Comparison.

pallets is in Figure 18. This made each suit of the Minor Arcana stand out from each other, while the whole deck began to feel like a cohesive project.

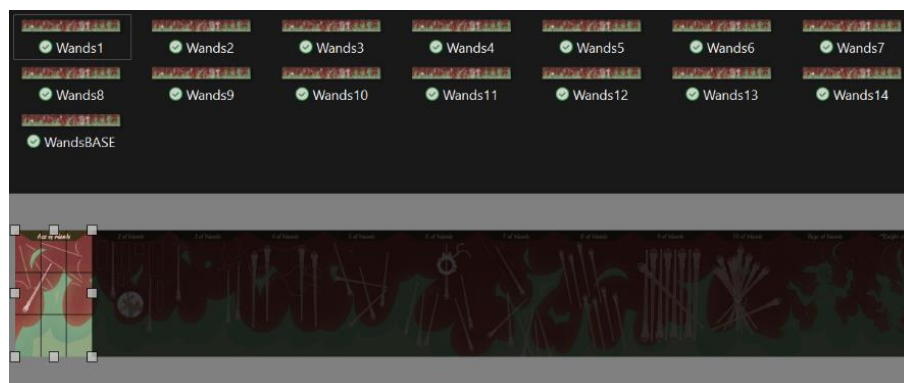


Figure 17: Breaking down *The Minor Arcana*.

The final step of creating the Minor Arcana was preparing the cards for printing. The overall files had to be broken up into

smaller ones. Figure 19 illustrates this process with the wands. The main file with all the cards was copied and flattened into a single layer PNG. Then the file was copied fourteen times, each file being renamed Wands [1-14]. From there, each file was cropped to size depending on the card. Rince and repeat fifty-six times and divide everything into their own folder.

Chromatic Veil Tarot was designed with printing in mind, though the plan behind printing changed. The original idea was to print the cards off at Wayne State College's Instructional Resource Center (IRC) and hand-cut them out.

This started a series of print tests that started as far back as April 2024. The goal of these prints was to decide the size of the cards and find the level of detail that can clearly be printed, Figure 20. The plan at the time was to align everything and print on both sides of 100lb cover stock. Though as soon as a test was done to test different backside



Figure 18: Paper Test, April 2024.



Figure 19: Slip Test, September 2025.

designs, it was realized that when printing on both sides of paper, there is a margin of error called ‘slip’. Slip is when the paper shifts when going through the printer and does not line up as intended, Figure 21. The second idea that was thrown around was to print off the front sides at the IRC and use the Studio Art’s Printmaking Lab to screen print the backsides- this would make Chromatic Veil Tarot a multimedia project. Though this method came with numerous drawbacks, the first one being accessibility. The time and resources needed to create a deck this way was high, let alone the price of the deck if it were ever to be recreated for other people to use. The other issue came from the final print test of the Minor Arcana through the IRC. The colors were not sitting well on the cardstock, a common issue for prints without a finish. The colors themselves were also coming out far darker than desired. This was an issue that gave little flexibility to fix, so the idea of screen printing the backsides was scrapped.

The solution to printing Chromatic Veil Tarot cleanly and efficiently ultimately came from a website that specializes in printing cards- collectors, playing, Tarot, etc. Make Playing Cards is a company that allows its users to upload any images, within certain size restrictions, and print them of a professional quality. This also made printing copies of the deck for others far easier than any other method. Make Playing Cards even allows users to upload their designs to be sold on their platform, though Chromatic Veil Tarot did not meet the requirements to be sold there. They require designs to be within a certain margin from the edges to ensure designs do not

bleed off the edges. This was more than a simple adjustment and would require giving up the core design mechanics of Chromatic Veil Tarot. However, this printing method allowed for more flexibility on the back side designs, shown in Figures 22 and 23. The idea was to include the elemental themes from the Minor



Figure 20: Backside of Chromatic Veil Tarot, Final.



Figure 21: Backside of Chromatic Veil Tarot, Scrapped.

Arcana on the back sides. The design in Figure 22 was favored so that is the design seen on the backs of the cards. From there, it was a matter of putting a select number of cards into Make Playing Cards to test the print quality. Only six of the Major Arcana and all the aces from the Minor Arcana were printed to see the color quality. The first test went well, though it seemed like some of the ink easily spotted up soon after being handled. This is because they were printed



Figure 22: Matte and Glossy Print Comparison.

and some ink picked up from basic handling. Meanwhile, the card on the right fared much better.

The full deck came out perfectly- the only error being that there were two Knights of Swords and

no Queen of Swords. Though that was a creator error and not the fault of Make Playing Cards, one that was easy to fix.

Words cannot describe the feeling of opening Chromatic Veil Tarot when it arrived in the mail. Not even the excitement of getting a new Tarot deck but getting to hold this project that had been primarily digital as a physical medium. It was a mixture of relief, excitement, and pride that everyone should experience at least once in their lives. Chromatic Veil Tarot was more than an honors project, it was a personal challenge of self-expression. Whether the cards are used as a tool for divination or self-reflection, Tarot is an art medium at its core. Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot is not the only system widely used, as dozens of artists in the past have put their own spin on the idea. Figures 3 and 4 are both from decks that, while sharing card names and symbols, are far different than what modern Tarot has grown into. As time goes on, artists take inspiration from those who come before and influence those who will come after. The decks that were looked at during the duration of this project influenced small line and color choices at every turn. Personal experiences shaped the way characters were represented. Both the Major and Minor Arcana of Chromatic Veil Tarot presented unique challenges that required creative solutions. They also created a deeper understanding of certain creative choices and design principles. Overall, this project gave a greater idea of the history behind Tarot, the different ways Tarot has been used for both personal enjoyment as well as the occult, and a deep dive into the production process of a Tarot deck. Exploring other cultures and artwork is essential to gaining a more rounded view of the world and understanding the ‘why’ of certain events. Look at art, look at everything, and appreciate the context it resides within.

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