

## An Appreciation of Pamela Colman Smith, Creatrix of Modern Tarot

[Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story](#) edited by Stuart R. Kaplan, contributors: Mary K. Greer, Elizabeth Foley O'Connor, Melinda Boyd Parsons [U.S. Games Systems Inc., 9781572819122]



[Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story](#) brings together the work of four distinguished scholars who have devoted years of research to uncover the life and artistic accomplishments of Pamela Colman Smith. Known to millions as the creator of the Rider-Waite Tarot deck, Pamela Colman Smith (1878-1951) was also a stage and costume designer, folklorist, poet, author, illustrator of ballads and folktales, suffragette, and publisher of books and broadsheets.

This collaborative work presents: a richly illustrated biography of Pamela's life with essays on the events and people that influenced her including Jack Yeats, Ellen Terry, Alfred Stieglitz, Bram Stoker and William Gillette. There is also a chronological survey of her folktales, art and poetry and an exploration of her lasting legacy.

Over 400 color images of Pamela's non-tarot art have been curated from her publications including *A Broad Sheet*, *The Green Sheaf*, *Blue Beard*, *Annancy stories*, *Russian ballet*, costumes, stage designs, *Irish magazines*, book illustrations, posters and much more.

This 440-page volume also includes:

- Select pages including autographs with sketches and scribblings reproduced from Pamela's 1901-1905 Visitors book
- Pamela's personal documents, correspondence, portraits, and photographs
- Rare archival material from several leading museums and libraries
- Extensive Bibliography of 525 entries and Index with over 2,000 listings

[Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story](#) is the most comprehensive and exhaustive collection of works by and about Pamela Colman Smith published to date.

### Editorial Appraisal

I have had a fantasy image biography of Pamela Colman Smith [PCS] in my head for some years, specifically around the psycho-biographical circumstances of the genesis of the Colman-Waite tarot deck, especially PCS's original contributions of 40 ambiguous pip images. The impact of these pictures were the seeds, that through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, created a tarot reading practice that evolved from occult divination and fortunetelling into a variety of therapeutic and psychological approaches to reading tarots for self and others, a means of exploring the significance of events, behaviors and relationships in one's life. These ambiguous images have provided to generations of anglophone card readers rich contentious imaginative fodder of endless projective-subjective interpretations and discussions of their mystery and the questions that arise viewing them in tandem.

My fantasy, as I have no wish to do archival work, is that PCS suffered from depression at the time she created the pip images, many of them derived from previous works. PCS mood may have come from a broken heart, perhaps feeling abandoned when Edy Craig, daughter of Ellen Terry, moved to the continent with another companion. PCS, perhaps under some influence from Waite and his circle, eventually found solace through conversion to Catholicism.



[Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story](#) does provide some indirect evidence for my conceit. It offers tempting and fulsome documentation of her many faceted careers in the Arts and Craft movement and bohemian circles. Melinda Boyd Parsons expressly shows how her friends images become part of the deck. Each of the four sections provides the best effusive account of her work so far available. Stuart R. Kaplan offers the best curation of PCS's folktales, art and poetry arranged chronologically. The lavish color illustrations give an indication of her Arts & Crafts style of illustrations. See the following blogs that discuss aspects of PCS's life and work. Highly recommended.

[Demystifying Pamela Colman Smith](#)

[Fools Journey: The Fascinating Life of Pamela Colman Smith](#)

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Excerpt: Pamela's Life —by Elizabeth Foley O'Connor

Corinne Pamela Colman Smith was an artist, poet, folklorist, editor, publisher, and costume and stage designer who was active from the mid-1890s through the 1920s. Born in London to American parents, Pamela traveled widely, spent a significant part of her youth in Jamaica, was educated as an illustrator at the highly-regarded Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and died in her beloved Cornwall, England. Her paintings were exhibited in many galleries in the U.S., Continental Europe, and England—where she lived the majority of her life—including several international art exhibitions. She also has the distinction of being the first non-photographic artist to have her work shown at Alfred Stieglitz's "Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession" in New York.

Pamela illustrated more than 20 books and many magazine articles, wrote two collections of Jamaican folktales, co-edited *A Broad Sheet* with Jack Yeats from 1902-1903, edited *The Green Sheaf* from 1903-1904 by herself, and, after its demise, ran the *Green Sheaf* press, which focused particularly on women writers, including her own work. Her venture into publishing appears to have emerged as both a calculated business move and a reaction to the frustrations she encountered when dealing with the virtually all-male publishing establishment. She occasionally referred to publishers in letters as "pigs" and vented her frustrations over failing to place work and not receiving royalties to which she considered herself entitled.<sup>1</sup> Active in the theatrical world, Pamela staged her own "miniature" theatre performances, traveled with the Lyceum Theatre Company, contributed set and costume designs to several plays, and performed Jamaican folktales and other poems for public recitals in both England and the U.S.

Pamela was an irrepressible spirit. This is reflected in both her nickname "Pixie" and her deviation from the standards and expectations for women of her time. She pursued a career and did not marry or have children; instead, she surrounded herself with like-minded female friends and companions. As a teller of West Indian Anansi stories at public performances in both London and New York, Pamela blended her interest in Irish and Jamaican folktales into a personal mythology that celebrated freedom, fearlessness and independence of spirit. These characteristics are evident in much of her work and are especially apparent in her two published collections of Jamaican folktales *Annancy Stories* (1899) and *Chim-Chim* (1905). The latter was published by her own *Green Sheaf* press and includes several traditional tales that emphasize the agency of the female characters.

Throughout her life, Pamela struggled with those who did not understand her and who had a hard time positioning her within existing gender, class and racial categories. John Yeats had this assessment in the summer of 1899 after meeting her to arrange a possible literary venture with his son W.B. Yeats:

"Pamela Smith and father are the funniest-looking people, the most primitive Americans possible, but I like them much... Her work whether a drawing or the telling of a piece of folklore is very direct and original and therefore sincere, its originality being its naïveté. I should feel safe in getting her to illustrate anything. ... She looks exactly like a Japanese. Nannie says this Japanese appearance comes from constantly drinking iced water. You at first think her

rather elderly, you are surprised to find out that she is very young, quite a girl ... I don't think there is anything great or profound in her, or very emotional or practical."

At the time of her visit to Yeats, the "rather elderly" Pamela was just twenty-one. John Yeats's assessment reflects both his paternalism and his biases against "primitive" Americans, especially those whom he assumed to be a class below him and whose racial origins he had trouble ascertaining. However, his comments are characteristic of the uncertainty and confusion contemporaries had in placing her into conventional categories like age and ethnicity. Perhaps in response to his and others'—assertion that she had Asian origins, Pamela created a sketch of herself in a kimono that was published in *The Critic* magazine in 1900. In the accompanying article, Pamela explains that the Japanese influence on her work is "not so much as people suppose." The article adds that the caricature was created "[w]ith a merry recognition of the association;"<sup>3</sup> moreover, it is characteristic of Pamela's irreverent humor.



Published accounts of Pamela's art and life also exhibited a tendency to exoticize her background and depict her, and often by extension her art, as simple and naïve. A full-page 1904 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article is representative: "There could be no greater contrast to the ordinary dainty young Heights girl, of pretty manners, or normal tendencies, conventional ways and the usual ambitions. Yet were an Iphetonga to be danced to-day, Pamela Coleman Smith [sic], this odd-artist mystic girl, would be trebly qualified for its inmost place." Pamela is described as different from most young women of her time due to her focus on an independent life and an artistic

career rather than marriage and children.

The unnamed writer appears to insinuate that she may have Native American blood as "Iphetonga" is both the Native American word for Brooklyn Heights and refers to the indigenous tribe who inhabited Brooklyn before the arrival of the Europeans.<sup>4</sup> However, "Iphetonga" also refers to a series of exclusive balls held in Brooklyn Heights in the 1880s and 90s that were eventually ended because of disagreements over which families had high enough social standing to attend. Both Pamela's maternal and paternal relatives inhabited the highest echelons of Brooklyn society, which would have guaranteed her an undisputed place at these soirées.

The clearest written reference to Pamela's possible mixed race comes in Henry Wood Nevinson's 1923 memoir, *Changes and Chances*, which recalls his time in London in the early 20th century. Nevinson terms Pamela an "exciting little person" and notes that he "supposed" she was "touched with negro blood."<sup>5</sup> A year later, Pamela's fellow Pratt student, Earnest Elmo Calkins, in his memoir, *Louder Please!* The Autobiography of a Deaf Man, likens Pamela during her folktale performances to "a strange African deity." He references Nevinson's book and states that while he had "never heard" that Pamela was of mixed race, it would "account for her peculiar dramatic power."<sup>6</sup>

Other contemporary articles passed beyond questioning Pamela's racial origins and described her as more animal or even ethereal than human. A 1912 *Delineator* profile states that she resembled "a

brown squirrel, and a Chinese baby, and a radiant morning..." As the article acknowledges, Pamela defied convention and easy categorization and, most importantly, blazed an important path for female artists: "Before she was twenty she was an inspiration to American women painters who were working toward something different. Many of our women have since done notable decorative work, but she was the pioneer who gave them courage." Similarly, Arthur Ransome's generally complimentary description of her in his 1907 *Bohemia in London* veers into this territory when he terms her a "strange little creature" and states that upon welcoming him into her London salon she describes herself as a "goddaughter of a witch and sister to a fairy." While it is impossible to know whether Pamela actually uttered these words or if they are Ransome's interpretation of what she would have said, it does seem in keeping with her known tongue-in-cheek type of response. What is clear is that people who met Pamela were uncertain about her exact racial makeup. Questions about her physical appearance seem to have affected the way Pamela and her work were received, possibly explaining her lack of sustained success in her artistic and publishing pursuits.

Excerpt: [Influences & Expression in the Rider-Waite Tarot Deck](#) — Melinda Boyd Parsons

This chapter explores some of the symbolism in The Rider-Waite Tarot deck, and the ways Pamela Colman Smith drew inspiration from her own life, beliefs, interests and friends at the time she created the cards.

There are two groups of cards in the tarot deck. First are the 22 Trump cards (also called the Major Arcana), which are the most tradition-bound, dating back to 15th century Renaissance cards that were used in card games. These cards are numbered and have names and illustrations, for example, The Fool or The Magician, but they do not correspond to any suits, nor do they have parallels in the traditional playing card deck. Second are the 56 Minor Arcana cards, which have suits similar to those in today's playing cards that correspond to Cups (Hearts), Pentacles (Diamonds), Wands (Clubs), and Swords (Spades). Additionally, each suit relates to one of the four basic elements—earth (Pentacles), air (Swords), fire (Wands) and water (Cups) What's fascinating is how much the four elements—earth, air, fire and water dominate the imagery in Pamela's visionary paintings, a characteristic that not surprisingly carries over into her tarot designs.

There are four court cards—Page, Knight, Queen, King—in each suit» The court cards display medieval-style military or crusader figures—the Page and Knight—and royalty —Queen and King—in each suit. According to tarot scholar Mary Greer, the court cards were based on designs by one of the founders of the Golden Dawn and somewhat resemble the very popular photographic postcards (called cabinet cards) of Victorian actors in costume. Pamela Colman Smith drew several of the court cards in the Rider-Waite Tarot as representations of Victorian and Edwardian actors in costume. They were, in fact, actor friends of hers whom she knew well and admired.

In addition to the court cards in each suit, there are numbered cards from One to Ten, called "pip" cards. To tarot historians, what is particularly interesting about the Rider-Waite deck is that it was the first modern deck to have pictorial scenes on every numbered pip card in each suit. Pamela's detailed artwork is what makes the tarot deck more accessible and easier to use. The pictorial scenes enable tarot readers to view each card and project themselves into the scene and to identify with those actions and meanings. The Rider-Waite deck also helps indicate Pamela Colman Smith's own concerns at the time, as she was largely responsible for creating it. Waite's descriptions of the Minor Arcana cards in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* are considerably briefer than his discussion of the Major Arcana. Therefore, it's

impossible to know now whose idea it was originally to illustrate the numbered cards. There were photographs of the Renaissance Sola-Busca Tarot, the only earlier deck that had full illustrations on the numbered cards, on display at the British Museum from 1907 on. Waite's knowledge of the Sola-Busca cards—or lack thereof—is unknown. Pamela, the artist and art historian, certainly was familiar with the deck, as she used a few of the Minor Arcana cards as sources for several of her own pip cards and court cards.

#### Pamela Colman Smith and Arthur Edward Waite



How and why did Waite and Pamela come together to create the Rider-Waite Tarot? In 1901, just after Pamela said she had her first vision to music, she joined London's Isis-Urania Temple of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret group devoted to the practice of magic, occultism, religious studies and mysticism. Disagreements among members led to a schism in 1903. Those interested in magic and occultism followed William Butler Yeats into his branch, while Pamela and others interested in Judeo-Christian mysticism went with Arthur Waite.

As Waite came to know Pamela better, he realized she had mystic and visionary qualities. Not only did he regard her as psychic, but he was pleased she already knew something of tarot. So she was the perfect person to create a "rectified" tarot deck, that is, one based on Judeo-Christian mysteries rather than occult magic. Waite had been Catholic but left the church, while Pamela converted to Catholicism a little over a year after she drew the tarot. As Waite said:

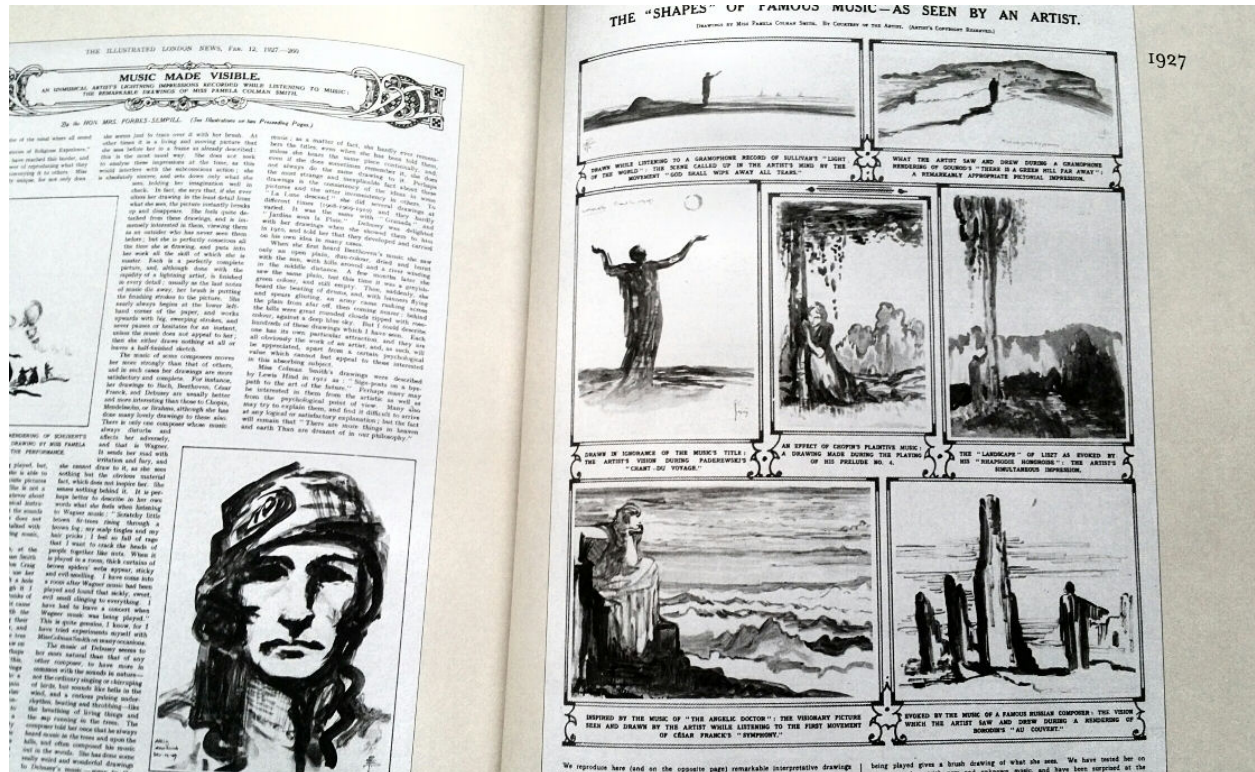
I... have interested a very skilful and original artist in the proposal to design a set [of tarot cards]. Miss Pamela Coleman [sic] Smith, in addition to her obvious gifts, has some knowledge of the Tarot values; she has lent a sympathetic ear to my proposal to rectify the symbolism by reference to channels of knowledge which are not in the open day, and we have had help from one who is deeply versed in the subject. The result...is a marriage of art and symbolism for...a true Tarot under one of its aspects.

Excerpt: Critical Commentaries on the Works of Pamela Colman Smith— by Mary K Greer

It is true that some viewers of Pamela's artworks, both in her heyday and into the 21st century, find her work less stimulating. They declare it relatively sparse, naïve, too primitive and old fashioned with its emphasis on faux medieval and bygone eras. Her color palette is limited, and tones (at least in the tarot deck) are too bright and too flat. Critics say she displays a flawed perspective and faulty figure drawing skills. Her tarot images are not ethnically diverse, being too Western and Christian, leaving out both Eastern and African culture and history. They find her erratic, immature and, dare it be said, "disturbing." Finally, it is felt that her work may not capture the evolving changes in culture and human experience.

This book, however, amply displays a greater range of her styles and themes than has been recognized in the past. The welcoming and tremendous sales of her tarot deck around the world show that it speaks equally to other cultures, even when those people are not fully aware of the myths and symbols to which an image alludes.

A great many people around the world agree that Pamela Colman Smith leaves a legacy of originality, sincerity, unaffected childlike naturalness and harmony of expression. They appreciate her clarity and richness of symbolic detail, the theatrical 'tableau vivant' quality of the tarot, and her mysterious faux medieval atmosphere. Her scenes arc like stories that can be read by a child and ring true as a fairy tale. Emotional energy can be clearly discerned from the expressions and body language of the figures. The flatness the vibrant colors, the simple faces and stylized movements of her tarot cards form easily recognized patterns and comparisons, linking thematically significant features throughout the work. Pamela's images are quirky and nonthreatening, with happy scenes that include frailties and unhappy scenes that show strengths.





## Conclusion

We now see Pamela Colman Smith as an independent, self-determined, artist, and performer who traveled freely and expressed herself whimsically and colorfully. She kept a sense of humor while upholding the truth and integrity of her own vision, spoke out against discrimination in her profession and insisted on her financial due. excelled at visual storytelling in the mode of Shakespeare's plays or the Arthurian and Grail legends so prevalent in her beloved Cornwall. People still make pilgrimages honor

her in the Cornish towns where she lived. She died just a short distance from Tintagel, site of Merlin's cave and the reputed castle where Merlin used magic to bring about King Arthur's conception through Igraine and Uther Pendragon. Who can say but the mysteries surrounding her birth and life are just as magical? Her stories are forever young as Pamela will be in our hearts.

If Pamela's legacy is her being an "envoy or messenger sent with a commission" then her charge has certainly been one of keeping the joy and magic of a natural, free creative spirit alive in the world. The richness and bounty of tarot decks that make use of her ingenious template will continue to inspire and delight for generations to come. <>