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INDEPENDENT PREMIUM

IN FOCUS

# Inside the mysterious life of the woman who designed the world's most famous tarot deck

If you've ever turned to tarot cards to tell your future, it's likely you were looking at the iconic illustrations of the Rider-Waite deck. But their creator has been largely forgotten. Here, novelist **Jill Dawson** tells the story of an extraordinary life

Saturday 07 March 2026 06:00 GMT

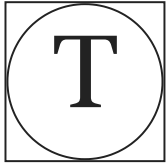


 1 Comment



Her tarot cards went on to sell over 100 million copies, but in her lifetime, artist Pamela Colman Smith was largely invisible (*Supplied*)





he first time I ever had my tarot cards read was almost 40 years ago, when I was 24. The tarot reader had the usual black lace skirt and silver jewellery, and said her name was Sian, but I could call her the High Priestess of Clapham. It was 11 September 1986, and I was living in a squat in Hackney, trying to write poetry. I sought her out for the usual reason: despair over a relationship ending. Also, I secretly wondered if I was having a nervous breakdown.

Sian turned over the Tower (things falling apart) the Death card (endings, of course); the Hermit (a period on my own); the Devil (addicted to Bad Love); the Hierophant (a magical helper).

“Not sure I trusted her interpretations,” I wrote back then. “I’m going to learn the tarot and read the cards for myself.” And, for the longest time, that’s what I did, teaching myself by turning over a card each day, using the Motherpeace deck designed by Karen Vogel and Vicki Noble, which was popular in the 1980s.

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#### RECOMMENDED

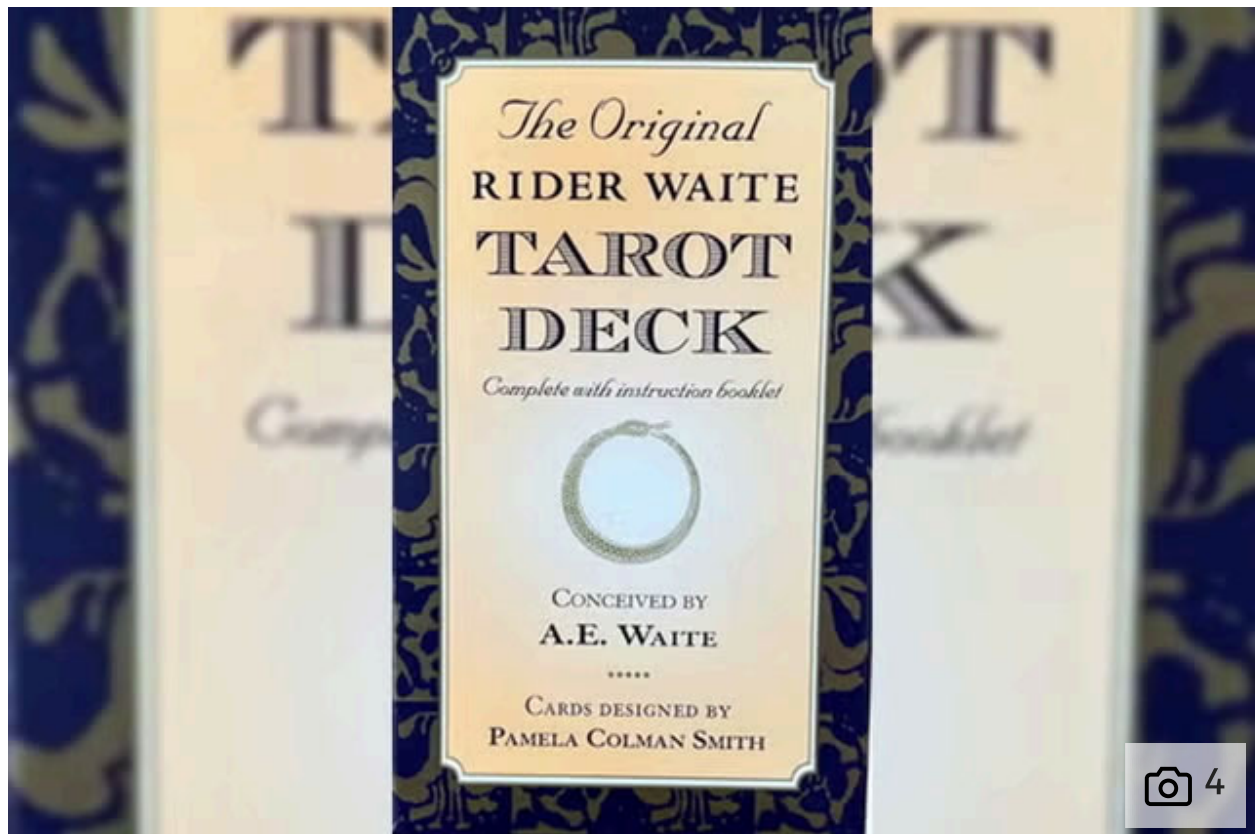
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But the deck most people visualise when they think of tarot is the Rider-Waite deck: the yellow Moon gazing down at the dog and the wolf in the Moon card; Death as a skeleton astride a white horse; the Fool stepping off the precipice of a cliff, his little dog leaping beside him. Like many, I had never really thought about the artist who had drawn those images. The artist’s name, it turned out, is Corinne Pamela Colman Smith. In her book *Waking the Witch*, Pam Grossman writes of Smith and her tarot: “It’s hard to say which is more galling: the paltry sum she received, or the repeated lack of credit for her designs.”

Pamela was born in Pimlico, London, in 1878, to American parents; her mother had been an actress in Brooklyn Heights, her father was a failed businessman and an artist. As a child, Pamela travelled extensively, living in London, Manchester, New York and Jamaica. She studied at the Pratt

Institute in New York, and was its youngest student at just 15 years old, but never graduated, and it was noted from the start by her tutors that she was “determined to do things her own way”.



In 1901, Smith was invited to join the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society of occult study and ritual magic where esoteric scholar Arthur Edward Waite commissioned her to illustrate the tarot deck (*Supplied*)

After the deaths of both her parents in her early twenties, Pamela was taken up by the actress Ellen Terry, who gave her the nickname Pixie, presumably for the mischief and rebellion she expressed. Terry commissioned Pamela to design programmes, costumes and sets, and introduced her to a world of art, poetry and theatre whose inhabitants included WB Yeats, the actress Florence Farr, Henry Irving and Bram Stoker. (Pamela was rarely impressed, describing Yeats as a “rummy critter”.)

Not content with her prodigious work for the Lyceum, where Irving produced plays and Terry played great heroines, Pamela also edited her own magazine, wrote and illustrated children’s books, had a sell-out show of her “music” pictures in New York, created a miniature theatre, and performed shows at her own salon in Chelsea, where she was described by writer Arthur Ransome as “goddaughter to a witch and sister to a fairy”.

In 1901, she was invited to join the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society of occult study and ritual magic. There she met the esoteric scholar Arthur Edward Waite, who commissioned her to illustrate the tarot

deck. In his memoir, he described her as “a draughtswoman” who “produced under my supervision” the coloured cards he “spoon-fed” her.

We know from some of the similarities that occurred that she must have studied the Sola Busca drawings newly available for study at the British Museum. Tarot’s origins are much disputed: many claimed it arose in ancient Egypt; most now suggest that it developed from a 15th-century Italian card game.



JILL DAWSON



PIXIE

BLOOMSBURY



Feminism has done much to uncover artists, including Pamela Colman Smith, who have not been given

Pamela also did her own research, making her sketches in London and Smallhythe, Kent, the home of Ellen Terry, where she sometimes illustrated key figures in the cards with the faces of her friends, and added her own idiosyncratic details, such as a little dog that belonged to Terry's son, Teddy Craig, on the Fool card. The deck and book, published in 1910 by Rider, were reviewed with characteristic disdain by fellow magus Aleister Crowley: "Mr Waite has written a book on fortune telling, and we advise servant-girls to keep an eye on their half-crowns..."

Pamela's contribution was sidelined in favour of continuing Crowley's beef with his rival Waite. He spelled her name incorrectly, an error repeated over the years. He does concede: "Pamela Coleman [*sic*] Smith has done some very beautiful and sympathetic designs."

The cards did not make her rich or famous. In a letter to her champion, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, she wrote: "I've just finished a big job for very little cash! A set of designs for a pack of tarot cards – 80 designs... some people may like them!"

Indeed, many did. The cards went on to sell over 100 million copies in 20 countries, loved by artists and writers from TS Eliot to Madonna, but this was not until later. In her lifetime Pamela was largely invisible, her name unknown. She died in Bude, Cornwall, in 1951, leaving everything she owned to Nora, her life-partner; most of her belongings were sold off to pay what she owed to the Inland Revenue.



The life of Pamela Colman Smith is the subject of novelist Jill Dawson's new book, 'Pixie' (*Supplied*)

Feminism has done much to uncover artists who have not been given their due. The Pratt Institute in New York had a phenomenally successful show of Pamela's work in 2018, and the curator told me that the immense interest "blew them away". Since my first foray 40 years ago, there has been an explosion of love for tarot, especially among twentysomethings.

Recently I studied a Jungian approach to tarot, and the respect for Pamela in that group, and joy for the way the designs on her cards turn up surprises (such as the snail in the Nine of Pentacles), was paramount, her name well known. Pamela is being honoured at the UK Tarot convention this October, and most tarot readers now call it the Rider-Waite-*Smith* deck. Her work is everywhere; you might slip it in a pocket, or hold it in your hand.

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“Will I ever publish a novel?” I asked the High Priestess of Clapham, all those years ago. I wish I had written down the card she drew in answer to that one. This month, I publish my 12th: a book about the life of Pamela Colman Smith.

*‘Pixie’ by Jill Dawson is published by Bloomsbury on 12 March*



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