

# Il segreto dei segreti

I tarocchi  
Sola Busca

## TEXT - ENGLISH VERSION

### 1. The Sola Busca Deck and the Tarot Game

The Sola Busca deck of tarot cards (named after its former owners, Marquise Busca and Count Sola) is the oldest complete tarot deck in the world. Its exceptional value is further increased by the high quality of its figures.

For these reasons in 1924 the deck was declared a listed object to be safeguarded by the Ministry of Public Education. In 2009, when the owners of the deck decided to sell it, it was purchased by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, which held the right of pre-emption. It was then brought to the Pinacoteca di Brera, which already housed a group of forty-eight cards from a precious late-Gothic deck originally designed for the Duke of Milan (the so-called Brambilla deck, purchased in 1971).

The exhibition, therefore, will be presenting this important accession to the public, while for the first time exploring its cultural context and complex iconography in depth. The research conducted for this occasion has shed light on the date and authorship of the deck and has also helped identify its likely original owner, thus providing an adequate framework for this intriguing and elusive item.

The game of tarots was initially known as that of "triumphi" (or "triumphs" – the word "tarocchi", or "tarots" having first being introduced in a 1505 document). The game is mentioned as a pastime enjoyed by the higher classes in sources from the 1450s onwards, especially in the Ferrara area. Many accounts survive of the supply of illuminated or printed decks for the House of Este, although the oldest surviving cards from Ferrara would appear to date from the following decade.

In Lombardy, by contrast, despite the lack of written evidence, we find some very early examples of illuminated tarot cards from the late-Gothic period (fragmentary decks from the Visconti and Sforza families), rightly celebrated for their beauty. These decks were used for the games played in court: a refined intellectual pastime that shared little in common with the card games practised in taverns, which were often deplored and proscribed by law. What was not yet en vogue at the time was instead the "divinatory" reading of tarots, which only became popular through the French school in the 18th century.

### 2. Squarcione's Heritage: Marco Zoppo and Giorgio Schiavone

In the mid-15th century, thanks to Filippo Lippi and Paolo Uccello first and then especially Donatello, who was responsible for creating the High Altar in the basilica of Sant'Antonio, Padua became a pole of attraction for artists from all over Italy. A



significant role in the development of a modern artistic language in the city was played by the school of Francesco Squarcione, an original master who offered his pupils – often his adopted sons – training based on the study of his collection of ancient objects, contemporary works and large number of drawings. Squarcione trained artists the likes of **Andrea Mantegna**, **Marco Zoppo**, and **Giorgio Culinovic** from Šibenik, better known as Schiavone.

The copying of both Classical models and ones by great contemporary artists, often by casually combining the two, led to the development of a style distinctly inspired by Squarcione, which spread – even years after the latter's death – across the domains of the Republic of Venice, into Emilia – through Zoppo's work in Bologna – and on both shores of the Adriatic: from the Marche to Dalmatia, where Schiavone returned in 1461 and **Carlo Crivelli** arrived from Venice in 1465.

This was the culture that influenced the author of the engravings of the Sola Busca tarot deck. Critics had already noted its close links with Marco Zoppo's works; what has been overlooked so far instead is its indebtedness to Schiavone, particularly when it comes to the rendering of certain facial features.

On display to illustrate these influences are the Dalmatian artist's *The Virgin and Child* from the Museo Correr in Venice – which redevelops a plaquette by Donatello (in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London) by drawing upon the softer features of Filippo Lippi's Virgins – and Marco Zoppo's small tondo with the *Head of John the Baptist*, whose marked foreshortening and striking metal-like outlines reveal all the originality of the artist's language. This painting is part of a polyptych centred around a



sacred conversation that is now scattered across various museum. In 1471 the polyptych had been sent to the Franciscan friars in Pesaro for the main altar of their church of San Giovanni Battista, acting as a veritable spearhead for the spread of Squarcione's style in the Marche.

### 3. The Sola Busca Tarot Deck

The Sola Busca deck consists of seventy-eight cards, twenty-two "triumphs" and fifty-six cards with the four traditional Italian suits (coins, swords, batons and cups): prints on paper made from bulino engravings and then illuminated using tempera colours and gold. From the bulino matrices several decks were produced that were simply printed. Various individual cards from these decks survive, some of which are on display in the exhibition, since they enable visitors to better appreciate the "verve" and striking style of the artist, which is often overshadowed by the illumination, particularly when it comes to faces. The seventy-eight cards from the Sola Busca deck were painted in Venice in 1491, as is revealed by the inscriptions on the shields held by *Mario* (triumph IIII) and *Bocho* (triumph XIII), which are now in a very fragmentary state, but were still legible in 1938.

Since the early 19th century, this deck has been attracting the interest of scholars on account of its completeness, rarity and uniqueness, as well as the highly distinctive style and imaginative flair of the figures depicted. Still, its author remained anonymous, its owner unknown, and even its dating until recently fluctuated between 1470 and the early years of the following century. The iconography of the deck, while outstanding, largely remained obscure. The more traditional images of 15th-century "triumphs" are here replaced by figures of ancient Roman warriors or Biblical heroes – a choice which may only partly be accounted for by invoking the medieval tradition of presenting illustrious men as *exempla* to be imitated. The pip cards, which would usually only feature the four suits, are here adorned with sophisticated images. Through a decipherment of these images, the deck has been shown to provide a vivid reflection of the kind of alchemical and Hermetic knowledge so dear to the Humanists.

The coats of arms featured in the deck, which have now been interpreted as those of the two Venetian noble families *Venier* and *Sanudo*, and the presence of the monogram "M.S." suggest that the owner of the Sola Busca deck, and the person responsible for its "colouring" in Venice in 1491, was *Marin Sanudo the Younger*, the famous Venetian Humanist and historian whom critics have recently shown to have harboured an interest in alchemy.

With regard to the authorship of the incisions, scholars had long identified a large corpus of prints whose style would fit the Sola Busca deck, and which they have assigned to an anonymous "Master of the Sola-Busca Tarocchi". The fact that in very recent years one of these engravings has convincingly been associated with the style of *Nicola di Maestro Antonio*, a painter from Ancona, has led scholars to attribute the whole group of prints, and hence the deck as well, to this original artist.

### 4. The "Master of the Sola-Busca Tarocchi": the Painter Nicola di Maestro Antonio d'Ancona

The diversity of 15th-century artistic culture in the Marche is beautifully illustrated by the works in the permanent collection of the Pinacoteca di Brera. Particularly stimulating was the long career of the Venetian artist *Carlo Crivelli*, who started working in the Marche in 1468. While initially displaying a language that was still distinctly Venetian, he progressively developed a personal style based on marked lines, shadings achieved through dense hatching, and extreme detail in the rendering of matter, ultimately attaining the height of virtuosity in his mature works.

Zoppo and Crivelli's works deeply influenced the original pictorial language of a painter from Ancona of the following generation, *Nicola, the son of the Florentine Maestro Antonio*, also a painter. His name has been traced through a single signed and dated altarpiece.

Aside from identifying other items from his catalogue of works, scholars have pointed to his indebtedness not just towards *Marco Zoppo*, but also towards *Giorgio Schiavone*, who in the early 1460s would appear to have returned to his hometown with a large number of drawings stolen from Squarcione, thus contributing to the spread in Dalmatia of the models used in the Paduan artist's studio. From Squarcione, Nicola inherited a love for forced poses, nervous profiles and a heightened expressiveness, as illustrated in particular by his altarpiece *Enthroned Virgin and Child with Four Saints* from the late 1470s – here exceptionally on loan from Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne in Rome.

Over the course of that decade, Nicola increasingly engaged with Crivelli's work: his style grew more calligraphic, sophisticated and filled with unnatural movements – the crowning expression of this being the splendid saints from the *Petrelli Altarpiece*, which also includes the *St Bernard* here on display. Through this enduring engagement with Crivelli, the painter's art also acquired a more monumental character, a capacity to situate figures in space, and a taste for transparencies and inner luminosity that are all clearly evident in the now divided polyptych to which the *St James* and the panel with the *Pietà* originally belonged.

### 5. The "Triumphs"

The "triumphs" series includes well known figures from Roman and Biblical history, as well as more ambiguous figures that are harder to identify, not least because of cases of homonymy and likely distortions. The former characters, however, are not great leaders offered as exemplars, but a series of figures connected to the conspiracy of Catiline and to the civil wars, possibly serving as allusions to domestic political affairs that are now difficult for us to identify.

Among the ambiguous figures, three instead stand out that might be connected to Renaissance history: *CARBONE* (triumph XII), *SABINO* (triumph XVIII) and *SARAFINO* (Horse of Coins). The possible identification of *CARBONE* with



Ludovico Carbone, a court orator in Ferrara in the latter half of the 15th century, may open up intriguing prospects for the study of the sources available to the Humanist who developed the complex iconographic programme for the deck. The possible identification of the figure in the upper medallion of the 2 of Coins as **Ercole I d'Este in the guise of Augustus** would also point to Ferrara.

It is worth noting that – whatever the identity of the “triumph” figures – in order for the pack to be actually used, these twenty-two cards necessarily had to include traditional depictions such as the “**triumph of Love**” and the “**triumph of Justice**”. These have for the first time been identified on the basis of the iconography and history of the figures depicted. *Bocchus*, for instance, who had betrayed his ally Jugurtha, embodies the figure of the *Traitor*, whereas Cato – who took his own life – embodies *Death*. What have yet to be identified are the “triumphs” corresponding to *Pope*, *High Priestess*, *Emperor*, *Empress* and *Angel* (i.e. *Judgement*), not least because the Sola Busca tarots follow no sequence we know from surviving cards or sources.

Nicola di Maestro Antonio  
Florence, 1448 – Ancona, 1511  
and anonymous illuminator  
Venice, documented in 1491  
*The Sola Busca Tarots*

78 cards, bulino engravings printed on paper pressed and glued as cardboard, illuminated with colours and gold, painted faux porphyry on the back, Venice 1491  
Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera, 2009 accession

## 6. The Graphic Art of Nicola di Maestro Antonio

The identification of the anonymous “Master of the Sola-Busca Tarocchi” – which is to say the author of the engravings for these tarots and of many others – with **Nicola di Maestro Antonio** represents the most significant discovery made through the studies conducted for this exhibition. The painter may have been introduced to a motif particularly dear to the Florentine artist, *Hercules and Antaeus*, via a cartoon with some nudes by Pollaiuolo which Squarcione – probably in 1464 – had lent the painter Mariniello from Split (who had been entrusted with retrieving the drawings **Schiavone** had stolen from Squarcione). This very theme is found in a print, now in the Albertina in Vienna, inspired by much the same ideas as the famous bronze statuette by Pollaiuolo in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence.

The connection with **Schiavone** becomes particularly evident in the artist’s love for forced poses, nervous profiles and a heightened expressiveness, as well as in the similarity between the profiles of some of their figures. This is the case, for instance, with the *Massimo Altarpiece* and the sheet with the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* from the same period (c. 1475-1480): the figure of the saint displays the same physiognomy as the Virgin of the altarpiece, whereas the torturer on the left recalls the Child. Over

the course of the 1470s, the artist developed an increasingly close relation with **Crivelli**; their mutual engagement turned into open vying, with the highly refined engraving of *Two Female Busts Shown in Profile with Fanciful Coiffures*. Many counterparts for the tarot figures may be found in the works of Nicola di Maestro Antonio, which present the same clear-cut outlines, often unusual poses, markedly muscular naked legs and original perspectives.

The presence of several heads rather freely based on the profiles of Roman emperors – probably as seen in miniatures or bas-reliefs – bears witness to a very free engagement with models from Classical antiquity.

## 7. Alchemy and the Renaissance

From an etymological point of view, the origin of the word alchemy is not quite certain. It may stem from a combination of the Arab determinative article *al* (= the) and a term of Greek origins connected to metalworking, *chyma* (= to mix), which in turn would be a translation of the Egyptian word *kemet* (= black earth fertilized by the Nile) – an allusion to the art of transmutation, capable of operating upon primary matter in such a way as to obtain incorruptible matter through a series of successive changes. Alchemical texts first made their appearance in the Western world around the first or second century AD in Alexandria, although there is also evidence for earlier mystery rites connected to the development of metalworking.

Right from the start, alchemical research also pursued a salvific goal: the *lapis philosophorum* (“philosophers’ stone”), the stone which is not a stone – be it gold or the elixir of life – bestows perfection on any body it is projected upon, thus bringing to completion the creative work of Mother Earth. In this respect, alchemy is closely connected to the theme of immortality, which in the Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance, as well as in our deck, is embodied by the figure of *Alexander the Great* (*King of Swords*).

Alchemical lore is generally said to have been first handed down through the revelation of a divine or semidivine figure, such as Hermes Trismegistus (“the thrice great”). A tradition of more strictly alchemical texts was developed especially in the Arab world, whence it reached the West via Spain over the course of the 13th century. A particularly significant role was played by the anonymous follower of Ramon Llull (Pseudo-Llull) who in the 1330s authored a number of alchemical texts. These were gathered into a single imposing volume for the first time in Florence in the latter half of the 1460s, under the title of *Opera Chemica* – here on display. The codex was magnificently illustrated in a Benedictine monastery by Girolamo da Cremona, a famous illuminator and a friend of Andrea Mantegna’s.

Llull’s texts proved of crucial importance for Italian alchemists, who regarded them as a sort of encyclopaedic compendium of both philosophical reflection (so-called “theoretical alchemy”) and technical practice (“practical alchemy”). The latter is most strikingly evidenced in the Venetian codex *Secreta secretorum*, which presents the most famous alchemists, along with the tools and operations necessary for all the various alchemical procedures.



## 8. The Alchemical and Hermetic Iconography of the Sola Busca Tarot Deck

The unusual features displayed by the figures on the pip cards would appear to be closely connected to alchemical and hermetic culture. In particular, within the suit of **coins** several cards would seem to allude to practices related to **minting**, such as assaying, hammering and the checking of flan sizes. These operations, however, may also refer to the **complexity of the opus alchemicum**, or alchemical work, as a **process for the transformation of matter that often takes metals (gold or silver) as its starting point**.

The suit of **batons** (on display in the previous room) also features alchemical motifs, offering a parallel between the *opus alchemicum* and agriculture, of the sort drawn in the treatises by Pseudo-Llull.

Further alchemical elements occur on the “triumph” cards we have already examined, since a likely alchemical allusion is to be found in **VI. SESTO**, who is portrayed as *Mercury*. A clear allusion to the philosophers’ gold (i.e. alchemists’ gold) is instead to be found in card **XVI. OLIVO**, which illustrates the “triumph of the Sun” (depicted in the top-right corner). In the foreground, in the lower-right corner, a basilisk was added: a mythical creature with the body of a rooster and the tail of a serpent which already the German monk Theophilus, in his 12th-century treatise, had identified (once pulverized) as an essential ingredient for obtaining the philosophers’ gold.

## 9. The Sola Busca Tarot Deck: Hermetic Culture

While largely unknown today, the Humanist and Hermeticist **Ludovico Lazzarelli** from San Severino Marche played a significant role in Italian court Humanism. He received his education in Padua and Venice and throughout his life remained in touch with leading figures of his day. Acting as a preceptor for noblemen’s sons, he was also appreciated as the author of works of poetry and prose. Whereas in the days of his youth he focused his interest on Classical poetry, Hermetic themes later captured his attention, particularly after his encounter with Giovanni “Mercurio” da Correggio, whom Lazzarelli regarded as the person responsible for his conversion to Hermetic doctrines. Precisely because of his personality, role, interest in Hermetic and alchemical themes, and documented relations with the courts of Ferrara and Urbino, as well as Padua and Venice, Lazzarelli is believed to have designed the complex iconographical programme of the Sola Busca tarots.

What proved of crucial importance for the Hermetic tradition of the Renaissance were the writings attributed to a mythical figure of Egyptian origin known as **Hermes Trismegistus**. An allusion to him is probably to be found in the turbaned head of the man on the *10 of cups*, which recalls the portrait of *Hermes*

in *Secreta secretorum philosophorum*, whose watercolour drawings were in all likelihood executed by the Venetian painter **Lazzaro Bastiani** in the late 1470s.

The Hermetic texts first reached Italy in the early 1450s; in 1459 they were acquired by Cosimo de’ Medici the Elder, who in 1463 asked Marsilio Ficino to translate them. The *Pimander* (which takes its title from the first treatise included in the collection) immediately enjoyed wide circulation in Tommaso Benci’s version – several editions of it were printed from as early as 1471. The spirit of Renaissance Hermeticism is ultimately to be found in the idea that alchemists can mould nature through the “search for a higher level of knowledge in which, while grasping the unity of all, one identifies with the all and operates within the all by transforming it” (E. Garin).

Through the Sola Busca tarot deck, Lazzarelli illustrates a **process of inner regeneration** that sets out from the exemplars of *Illustrious Men* of Antiquity, and of contemporary men whom players at the time would no doubt have recognized, and proceeds through various degrees of knowledge – acquired by means of direct enlightenment in a master-pupil relationship – in such a way as to **ultimately make man divine** and, as such, capable in turn of generating souls, in a “search for salvation through the perfecting of matter” (M. Pereira).

## 10. Alexander the Great, the New Sun

A special role within the deck is played, in the guise of the *King of Swords*, by a character belonging to the medieval series of *Illustrious Men*, the Nine Worthies: **Alexander the Great**. As deified hero, new sun and man who while still alive had reached the heavens on a chariot led by griffins, Alexander was an extremely popular figure, especially in courts.

In *Secretum secretorum*, an epistolary exchange between **Aristotle** and his disciple Alexander on astrology, dietetics, alchemy and other matters relevant for those in power, we learn that the great philosopher had introduced his pupil to the mysteries of alchemical lore. This information may shed some light on the connection between the figure of the military leader and the most obscure iconography of the deck, that featured on the cards from the suit of coins.

What may also be traced back to alchemy is the ancient iconography of the ruler as new sun, this being an old alchemical symbol for gold, the most precious metal produced by the earth, and hence the best material for obtaining the *lapis philosophorum*. The privileged role of Alexander the Great is further confirmed by the fact that various cards in the deck are devoted to figures connected to his history: *Zeus Ammon* (**AMONE**, *Horse of Swords*), the mythical father of Alexander according to the oracle of the Oasis of Siwa; his mother *Olympias* (**OLINPIA**), the dreaded lady of the snakes, here featured as the *Queen of Swords*; and Naptanabus (**NATANABO**, *Horse of cups*), the “magician and intendant” who, like Aristotle, was Alexander’s teacher.