

The Four Worlds and the Minor Arcana

Many fourfold systems of organizing the universe have been attributed to the four suits of the Tarot: most people are already familiar with that of the four elements of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. However, it is useful to be aware of others, since they add to our understanding, and in particular one system (that of Kabbalah) can form the basis for the meanings we choose to use for the cards. Based on a modern esoteric understanding of the four elements we can link the suits to an area of human experience and everyday life.

Wands: the self, ego, sexuality, creative endeavors and energy.

Coins: the physical, body, money, and daily life.

Swords: the mind, intellectual and communication.

Cups: the heart and soul, emotions, social relationships, and spirituality.

In Kabbalah, a Jewish system of mysticism that for many centuries has been used and studied by students of the Western Mystery Tradition (which the Tarot also played a part in), the universe is organized into a diagram called the Tree of Life. This tree is split into four “worlds” that relate to different stages of manifestation—beginning at the most unmanifest divine spark, and ending with spirit in matter. These four worlds are linked to the suits of the Tarot thus:

Wands: Atziluth, Fire; the world of emanations, archetypal world

Cups: Briah, Water; the world of creation, intuitive world

Swords: Yetzirah, Air; the world of forms and ideas, intellectual world

Coins: Assiah, Earth; the world of action, physical world

Using this system we could view the suits not only as separate entities, but as continuations of each other, beginning with the initial creative force and energy in Wands, which finds form in the womblike creative urge of the Cups suit to bring something into being; the suit of Swords represents the intellectual understanding of the process and the process of formation itself, and finally the suit of Coins shows the action that comes from this, and the material reality. The four worlds associated with the suits also invite us to think of each number of the Minor Arcana as the same concept but on a different level: for instance, all the Aces can be considered the seeds of the suit, but planted in different worlds.

Kabbalah and the Minor Arcana

The Tree of Life bears ten spheres (sephiroth), each of them corresponding to a manifestation of the Divine, for example Binah, the Great Mother; Chesed, the power of Mercy; and Tiphereth, the solar power of harmony. Each of these ten sephiroth is attributed to the Minor Arcana from 1-10: all the Aces correspond to Kether, the first sephiroth, and all the Fives to Geburah, for instance. These sephiroth bear their own associations.

1—*Kether*, meaning “Crown”: the first emanation of spirit; Divine spark, unity, the highest.

2—*Chockmah*, meaning “Wisdom”: the “masculine” principle involved in creation; it takes the raw energy from Kether and expands it. Drawing a point

from 1 to 2 we get a line, so Chockmah is a reflection of Kether's unity: the divine creative word.

3—*Binah*, meaning "Understanding": the "feminine" principle of creation; it gives form to the creative word and brings it to manifestation.

4—*Chesed*, meaning "Mercy": the love that unites. From it comes all spiritual virtues.

5—*Geburah*, meaning "Strength": the energy that creates, the will of the universe acting through natural laws.

6—*Tiphereth*, meaning "Beauty": the harmony and fulcrum of the universe and its forces, it mediates the divine emanation from the other sephiroth.

7—*Netzach*, meaning "Victory": the emotions, intuition, and reflection. It perceives and receives with a sense other than intelligence.

8—*Hod*, meaning "Splendor": the intellect, giving meaning to thought through language.

9—*Yesod*, meaning "Foundation": the purifier of the emanations and connects the energy of the other sephiroth to the lowest sphere.

10—*Malkuth*, meaning "Kingdom": the physical world, stability.

In Kabbalistic Tarot all the Aces correspond to Kether, all the Twos to Chockmah, all the Threes to Binah, and so on. Thus each card of the same number has something in common with its fellows. We can use this to gain Minor Arcana meanings by uniting the qualities to the sephiroth with those of the four elements or the four worlds of the Tree of Life. For instance, the Six of Cups would be Tiphereth in Water or Tiphereth in Briah: a harmonizing of the emotions, and a mediator for the intuitive forces of creation. In many Golden Dawn decks you will find that the Minor Arcana bear titles as well as suits and numbers: these titles are given to reflect the Kabbalistic correspondences of each card. If you want to use a Golden Dawn deck or a Thoth-based deck, I highly recommend you study the Kabbalistic Tarot thoroughly so that you can understand why the Minors have certain meanings. Be aware, however, that some of these meanings differ from the Rider Waite-based decks that don't work with the Kabbalistic system.

Due to the consecutive nature of the sephiroth, the Minor Arcana in this system can be viewed as beginning at the Aces of each suit with a single, united seed or raw spark of the element and progressively expanding and dividing into more manifest forms of their suit.