

# Annotations / Inspirations

Kerstin Brätsch & Bettina Funcke

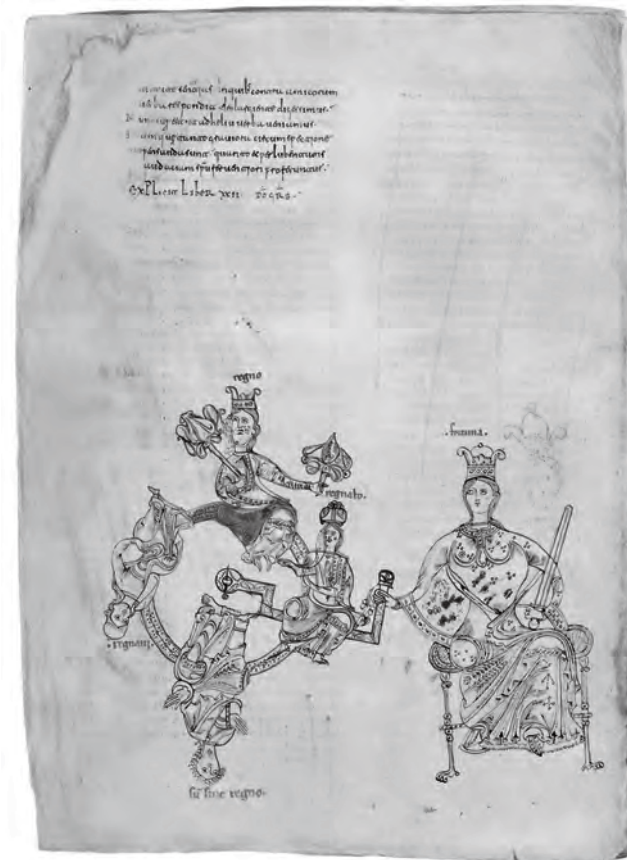


208 **Inanna**  
*Ishtar Cylinder Seal and Rolling*, Mesopotamia,  
 Akkadian Period, c. 2334–2154 BCE  
 © The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

In April 2020, Kerstin joined Ariana Reines' Invisible College, a Zoom community Ariana had founded in response to Covid as a space for artists to work. A twelve-day long study in ecstatic receivership, anaphora, underworld journeying, the ethics of bliss, and female statecraft, artists and writers gathered online to read out loud, discuss, and freely associate on the myth of *Inanna, Queen of Heaven*. Kerstin was dipping in and out of reading and drawing, working on some of her earliest *Para Psychics*. One of the most vital ancient myths about the first goddess

in recorded history, Inanna's story of descent into the underworld was a fitting metaphor for the beginning of the pandemic, as her journey engages with ideas of death, transformation, and rebirth.

The seal shows Inanna (known to the Semites as Ishtar) in full regalia, standing triumphantly with one foot on the back of her roaring lion as she holds him on a leash. Horns extend from her miter, and in her left hand she holds a single-edged sword. Two quivers sprout from her winged shoulders, suggesting both her martial and supernatural natures. In the sky beside her appears an eight-pointed star, emblematic of her manifestation as the Venus star. Another goddess wears a single-horned headdress, denoting her lower rank, and gestures in worship to the Queen of Heaven and Earth.



*Fortune Turning Her Wheel: Regnabo, regno, regnavi, sum sine regno / Ruling, about to rule, without a kingdom, having ruled*  
 Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, written in three scripts in Spain in 914 CE, the main scribe named Gomez  
 © The University of Manchester

The drawing *Fortune Turning Her Wheel* from a tenth-century Spanish manuscript of Gregory's *Moralia on Job*, is the only figurative decoration in the entire book. This early depiction of the Wheel of Fortune is unusual. We see Fortuna looking upon the idealized human, who embodies only a governmental function rather than an ordinary human being made of flesh and bone. In medieval times the individual human did not yet exist.

The four figures on the wheel, in various states of regal or plain dress, represent four stages of rulership clockwise from the top: *Ruling, about to rule, without a kingdom, and having ruled*. Fortune herself and the two crowned figures in the wheel cast their gazes up and away from the viewer, while the two despondent figures look imploringly at Fortune as if requesting that she intervene on their behalf.

In later depictions, when transitioning from illuminated manuscripts to panel painting, the wheel stands on the ground, embedded in a landscape within a human realm. There is no three-dimensionality yet in this Wheel of Fortune, but only a free floating non-human space. Fortuna is not inserted by God to rule, but is God herself. Time is circular: past, present, and future are not linear. All states exist equally.

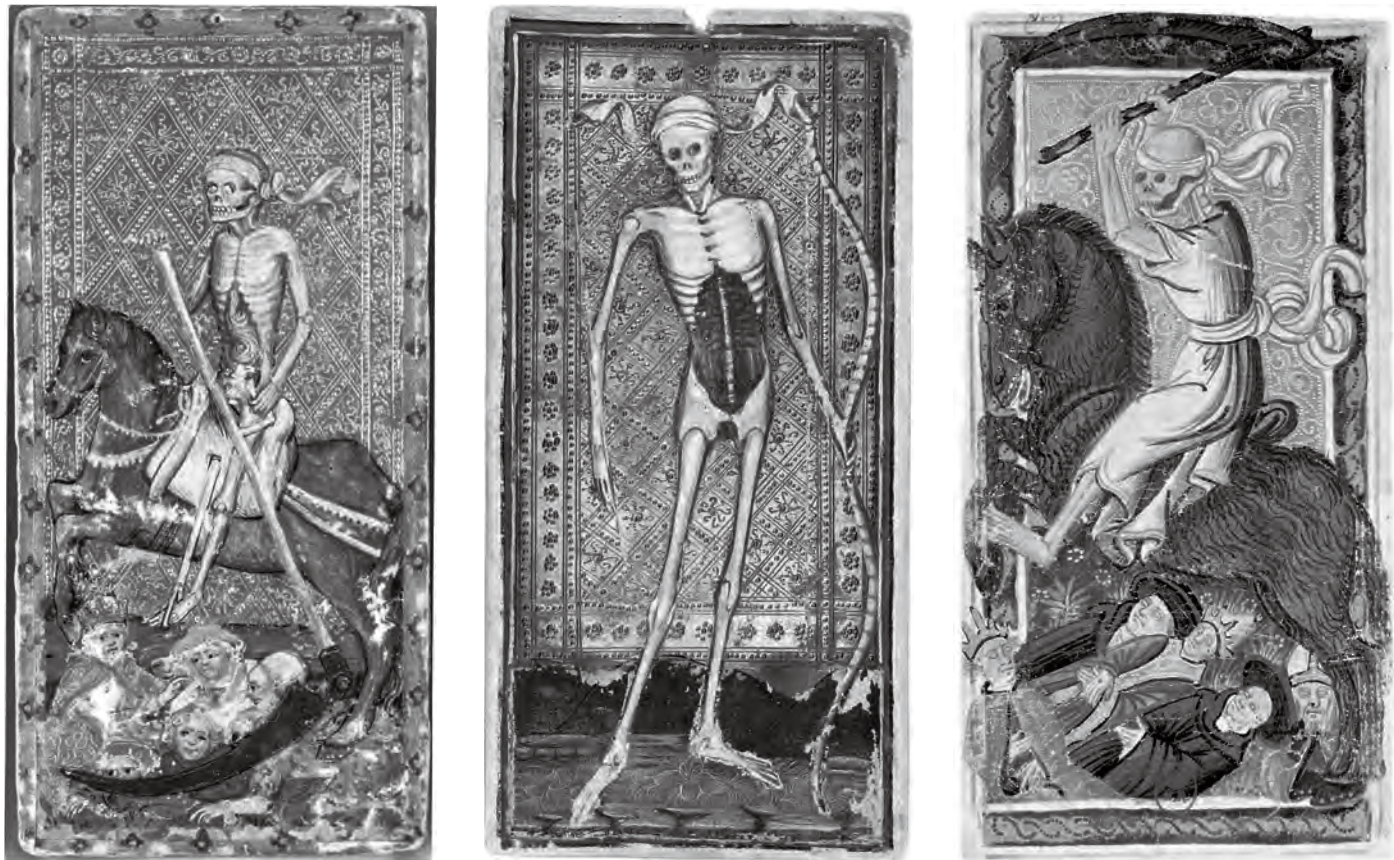


Upper Rhenish Master, *The Little Garden of Paradise*, c. 1410–20  
 Mixed technique on oak  
 © Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main

*The Little Garden of Paradise* literally embraces Kerstin's *Para Psychics* book from its inside, while partially being hidden. This unusual treatment of a reproduced artwork points to Kerstin's fascination with the work, which she employed here like a hidden gift or secret of the *Para Psychics* book. Once could say that in general veiling and revealing are integral to spiritual experiences, practices, or religious images.

This intimate, small-format painting depicts a *Hortus Conclusus* (closed garden) scene. It could be seen as a simple representation of the connectedness of all living matter: plants, humans, animals, and little creatures. The sky and some cloaks were painted in lapis lazuli blue, which informed Kerstin's choice for the outer jacket design of the *Para Psychics* book as a blue block. Cover, spine, and the edge of the pages are lapis lazuli blue. Lapis lazuli was a high-quality pigment widely known for its luminosity and iridescence in occidental art. It was rare and had to be brought by merchants across the sea, which gave the color its second name, "ultramarine." Its pigmentation gives the heavenly sphere a material aesthetic.

Kerstin's own as-of-yet-unrealized *Hortus Conclusus* garden project, which included extensive mosaic paintings, was inspired by the philosophy of the twelfth-century mystic Hildegard von Bingen. At the center of this medieval saint's healing practice was an understanding of the reciprocity between plants and the astrological realm. Based on Von Bingen's cosmic philosophy, Kerstin's layout of the garden was designed as a giant traversable painting facing the sky. It was to function as a map for a future painting, a living painting, an ever-becoming body where nature and art would merge into one; an artwork whose lifespan would stretch into a different paradigm of time.



**Death Cards from Different Fifteenth-century Tarot Decks**

left: *Death*, Visconti di Modrone Tarot Cards, Milan, c. 1428-47  
Workshop of Bonifacio Bembo, fl. 1447-78, d. bef. 1482  
© Yale University Library

middle: *Death*, Visconti Sforza Tarot Cards, Milan, c. 1450-80  
Pierpont Morgan Library. Manuscript. M.630.12.  
Courtesy of The Morgan Library & Museum

right: *Death*, Charles IV Cards, Northern Italy, late fifteenth century  
Courtesy of The National Library of France

Tarot's origin is uncertain, but it is likely that the first cards came from India, the Middle East, or Egypt. Europe's early references to tarot date to the 1440s and 1450s and are centered around Venice, Milan, Florence, and Urbino. Tarot cards employed the standard Italian suits—Cups, Swords, Batons, and Coins—with values from ten to one and with Kings, Queens, Knights, or Knaves, up to fifty-six cards, which represented the general social order. Twenty-one trump cards, or *tarocchi*, were added, with the Fool at the bottom leading up to the Emperor and Pope at the top. Tarot is a game of trick-taking and the rules of the game have likely not significantly changed since the fifteenth century. Although the divinatory

aspect of tarot didn't become popular until the eighteenth century, alchemical, astrological, and hermetic imagery did appear in some earlier *tarocchi* decks because it was a part of the imaginary of the time.

The Death card is Kerstin's favorite, though it is probably the most feared and misunderstood of all the cards in the Tarot deck. The Death card has elements of a sudden and unexpected change: it symbolizes the end of a major phase or aspect of one's life. It concerns endings and beginnings; transcendence, transformation, and transition. Death represents alteration and an expansive idea of time. It is an inherent part of being alive.

The tarot deck is a devotional set of cards made up of Major and Minor Arcana. The Major Arcana tracks the Fool's Journey to enlightenment. Its structure follows the traditional Hero's Journey and the moment we ask a question in a tarot reading, it shows the obstacles and major shifts that happen along the way.

Kerstin's *Para Psychics* are an attempt to create a synchronicity of simultaneous spaces that break down the (man-made) illusion of hierarchy and commonly known linear progression.



**The Tarocchi Players, c. 1440s**

Artist unknown  
Fresco in the Borromeo Palace, Milan  
Photo: Kerstin Brätsch

*The Tarocchi Players* was painted around the time tarot (*tarocchi*) cards were invented. It is one of a group of frescoes in the *Sala dei Giochi* (Games Room) of the Palazzo Borromeo in Milan.

It is not inappropriate that the image looks like a photograph of card-playing ghosts. These specters have stories, as well as fabulous hats, hairstyles, and tarot cards. . . . We see five young gamers crammed into half a small card table. They are actively involved in playing a 'trick', meaning to play cards of different values to see whose card will be of highest value and take the others. Completed tricks are collected into stacks in front of each player who has taken them. . . . Erosion has been so rapid in the last century, particularly because of changes in humidity and ground and air pollution . . . Palazzo Borromeo was bombed in World War II . . . the ceiling was blown off the *Sala dei Giochi* and in came the elements.

—Glenn Wright, *Pathology of the Poet*, Substack

The deck depicted in the *Tarocchi Players* fresco is known as the "Brera-Brambilla" deck and is located at the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan. The Pinacoteca hosts one of three oldest sets of *tarocchi* cards in the world.



**Celestial Atlas, 1660**

*The Northern Stellar Hemisphere, with the Terrestrial Hemisphere Lying Beneath*, plate 26 from Andreas Cellarius' *Harmonia Macrocosmica*, 1660  
Publisher: Gerard Valk and Peter Schenk, Amsterdam  
The Minnich Collection, The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 1966  
Courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art

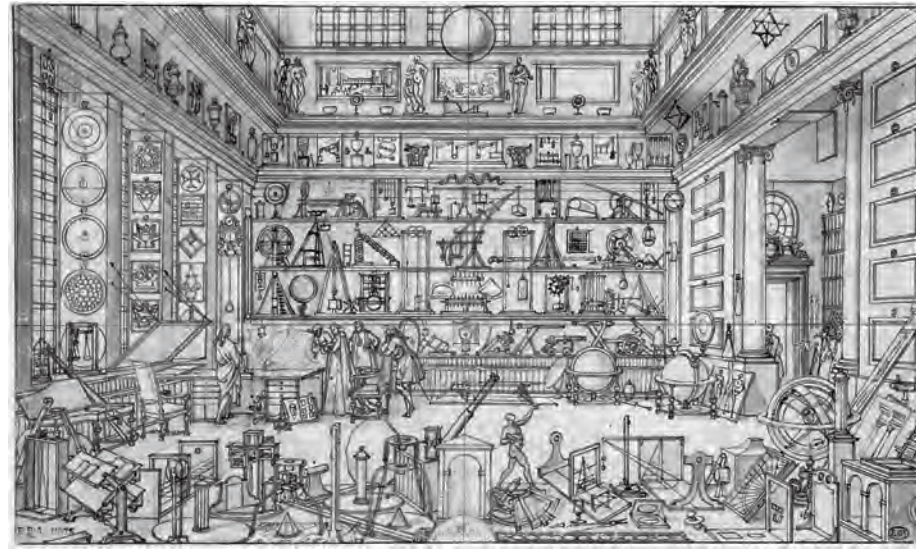
Did the sun orbit the earth or did the earth orbit the sun? In the 1600s this was up for grabs. The greatest minds in science and religion waged a war of observation and ideology to try and answer the question of our true place in the universe.

Andreas Cellarius' *Harmonia Macrocosmica* condenses the 1500-year-long history of astronomical systems into a single star atlas, depicting every competing theory and philosophy of the cosmos in a single, beautiful volume. The final pages of the *Macrocosmica*, including this celestial map, leave science behind to embark on a series of colorful and imaginative depictions of the constellations—Greek, Roman, and the later Christian icons. Here the stellar constellation of the northern hemisphere is placed on top of the terrestrial hemisphere.

*Harmonia Macrocosmica* was criticized in the seventeenth century for refusing to take a side in the debate over heliocentrism versus geocentrism, science versus religion. It doesn't tell us *how* the universe works; instead it shows how we see ourselves in it.

There is a parallel here with Sébastien Leclerc's "ideal studio" (c. 1713), roughly from the same period, in terms of not choosing one side or the other but instead depicting contradictory theories or debates simultaneously.

Sébastien Leclerc, *The Studio of Monsieur Leclerc*, "second" drawing, c. 1713  
 Pen and brown ink, gray wash  
 © Beaux-Arts de Paris, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



Sébastien Leclerc's drawing of his own imaginary, and perhaps ideal, studio shows a sort of *Wunderkammer* (cabinet of curiosities), revealing a condensed representation of the world. Its shelves are filled with instruments, machines, models, and tools for helping to grasp the world. We see a rectangular interior with an extremely high ceiling in a frontal perspective and perfect symmetry. This arsenal of tools depicts a contradictory, rather than an enlightened, world. Various worldviews collapse onto each other. Here we might realize that an accumulation of knowledge doesn't necessarily lead to consistency or clarity. There are machines for architecture, for war, for moving forces, for the balance of liquids, for the gravity of the air, for the elevation of waters, for

perpetual motion, for gnomonics, for statics, for vision, for perspective, for optics, and catoptrics. Piled up instruments include projection screens, a revolving lectern, tweezers, a long ruler with a binocular viewfinder, an hourglass, a small folding sundial, an instrument for prismatic mirror anamorphoses, a magic lantern against which is placed a compass, a graduated apparatus for studying the motion of the pendulum, an architectural board, and many others.

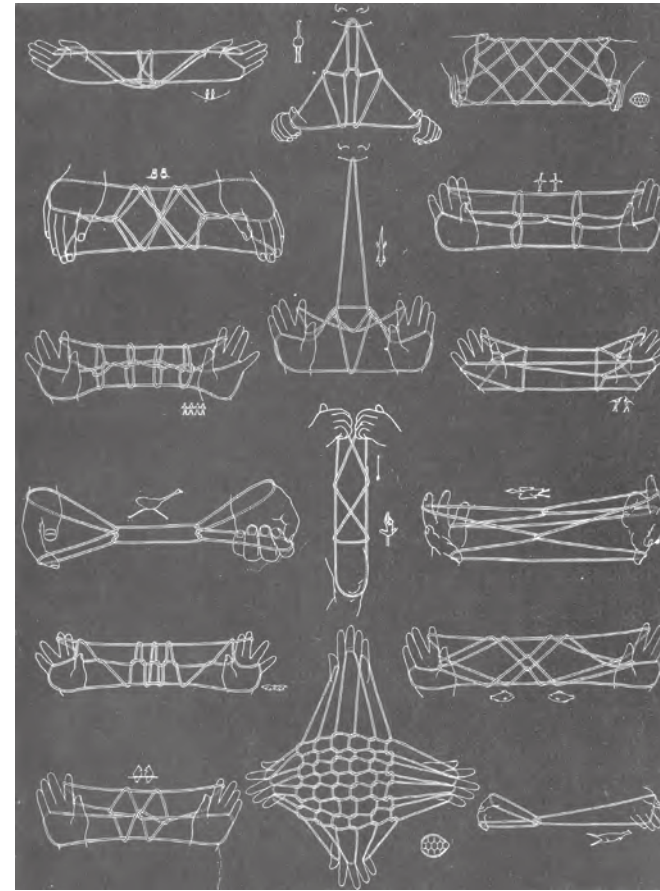


Jantar Mantar, c. 1727-34  
 Astronomical instruments, yantras, at the Jantar Mantar observatory, Jaipur, India  
 © Simon Fraser / Science Photo Library

Jantar Mantars are architectural astronomical instruments similar to observatories, used to compile astronomical tables, predict planetary movements, measure time, and forecast eclipses. Steps lead up to a viewing platform, where the movements of celestial bodies could be observed and tracked. The planetary movement of the stars as a "sky clock" is the foundation of our current calculation of times. The biggest monument at the Jantar Mantar observatory is the *Samrat Jantar*, a twenty-seven-meter-high sundial that can measure time within an accuracy of two seconds. The observatory is one of five that Maharaja Jai Singh II constructed in west central India between 1727 and 1734. It was restored in 1901.

Kerstin researched these astronomical structures while working on the above-mentioned *Hortus Conclusus*, a large-scale outdoor garden project. She envisioned bringing the cosmic relations in dialogue with plant life on the ground and building a fresco-sundial with a motif from her *Para Psychics*. She was drawn to the idea of a painting that would measure time by a simple means such as sunlight.

Humans still have the capacity to experience the infinite through their body, revealing time as a construct beyond the constraints of a human mind.



Donna Haraway, *String Figures*  
 AUSTRALIA. *Australia*. String Games of Northern Queensland  
 Antique photographic book illustration for *Customs of the World*, ed. Walter Hutchinson, London: Hutchinson & Co, 1913  
 © Antiqua Print Gallery / Alamy Stock Photo

String figures are a design formed by manipulating string around one's fingers. The complex patterns that appear can be made purely for entertainment, but have also been used to pass on information about tribal legends or practical information about daily life.

In her film, *Story Telling as Earthly Survival* (2017), Donna Haraway reminds us that "thinking is a materialist practice with other thinkers, and some of the best thinking is done as storytelling. We need other kinds of stories. . . . But good thinking always happens at the moment of speechlessness." Especially in a time of ecological urgency, we need to question the language we use. For Haraway, the stories we tell, the practices we engage in, and the multispecies worlds we inhabit can all be tools for discovering ways of caring and thinking about and across sentient beings. This could involve an approach to countering the logic of capitalist progress, which has brought us to the current multispecies genocide. Passing string figures from hand to hand, feeling the magic of transformation from figure to figure, can serve to demonstrate our collaborative practices, modes of action, and ways of relating across species.



Ant fungus (*Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*), Peru, 2011  
 © Linden Gledhill

Zombie fungi control the behavior of their insect hosts with exquisite precision. *Ophiocordyceps* compels ants to perform the death grip in a zone with just the right temperature and humidity to allow the fungus to fruit: a height of twenty-five centimeters above the forest floor. The fungus orients ants according to the direction of the sun, and infected ants bite in synchrony, at noon. They don't bite any old spot on the leaf's underside. Ninety-eight percent of the time, the ants clamp onto a major vein.

—Merlin Sheldaske, *Entangled Life*

Reading Merlin Sheldrake's *Entangled Life* Kerstin became interested in fungi culture and their interconnectedness to plant life, discovering how vast the diversity of the fungi world is compared to that of plants. She was fascinated to learn about the ways in which the mycorrhizal root systems serve as connecting points for solid media, such as when fungi intertwine rocks and plants with one another. It's inspiring to realize that all recognizable life on land depends on plants, and that the history of plants is actually the history of the relationship between algae and fungi. Fittingly, fungi have a very fluid sense of individuality, having no fixed shape or body, as they are constantly unfolding themselves by fusing with other networks. In this way, fungi are an example of utter entanglement and constant collaboration: of non-binary identity.

Zombie mushrooms and the idea of tapping into a frequency.

Insectile memory / the insect's mimicry: to play and *be* dead at the same time. The insect has no control anymore over its body while still being alive. The entanglement of the mushroom doesn't stop. Instead, it keeps on moving through other living entities.

