

Dealing the Day of the Dead

Ashfield watercolorist creating a new deck of Tarot cards



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Ashfield watercolorist and Tarot card artist Laurel Thorndike displays several cards.



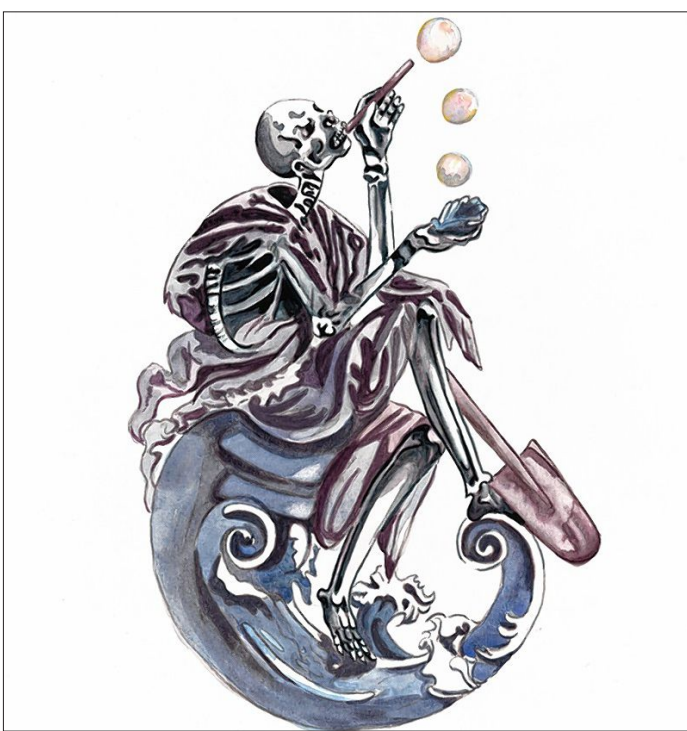
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Laurel Thorndike is currently fascinated with Little Red Riding Hood.



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There are a lot of Tarot decks based on fairies and witches and that sort of fantasy realm. Laurel Thorndike said she has determined that no tarot deck to date had used imagery related to the Day of the Dead, so she's creating one.



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La Muerte or the Death Card.

By TINKY WEISBLAT
For The Recorder

The hills of Franklin County inspire diverse forms of belief and creative endeavor. To my knowledge, Laurel Thorndike's work is unique in our area. This Ashfield watercolorist is creating a deck of tarot cards using visual themes relating to la Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead. This Mexican holiday, fast becoming popular in the United States, falls on Nov. 1 and 2. Those who celebrate believe that the dead return to earth once a year on these days. Mexicans welcome their dead family members and friends in early November with traditional imagery, including brightly dressed skeletons and skulls and vividly colored flowers, partic-

ularly marigolds.

I spoke to Thorndike recently about the tarot cards and about her work in general.

The artist, whose maiden name is Clark, grew up in Heath. "I've always drawn and painted," she told me. "My mom used to draw and color with us kids and I think that's where it all started...."

"I started out drawing horses a lot in high school. Again, I think it was an influence of my mom, who always did horseback riding."

As she grew into her own as an artist, Thorndike recalled, she moved away from horses and began sketching and painting fantastic, mythical creatures. She enjoys exploring traditional folk tales as well; she is currently fascinated by Little Red Riding Hood.

The artist went on to study with artist Julie Hall Roche for many years. Thorndike has also taken a master class in illustration. She most recently created the cover art for the novel "Hearken to Avalon" by local author Arianna Alessandra Collins.

In addition to her art training, Thorndike studied dance for 14 years. She sees a connection between dancing and her watercolor work.

"I was really shy as a kid," she noted. "My mother thought dance would help me overcome the shyness and further express myself creatively.... I do a lot of figure work in my art, and people have commented that there's a lot of movement and flow in my art. I think it comes from the dance."

I asked how she came to the world of tarot. She admitted that she had had no connection to the mystical cards until Rich Roth of Greenfield approached her to suggest that she design a tarot deck.

Thorndike explained that she used to live in Colrain and has participated for many years in the Crafts of Colrain studio tour each fall. Roth and his wife Sharon, longtime supporters of the arts, discovered her on the tour in 2009 and purchased some of her work.

They went on to employ her part time in their high-tech firm. The job gave her income but also time to create art. When Roth retired, Thorndike said, "he was looking for a project to keep him busy and invest in."

He came up with the idea of asking her to create a tarot deck. According to Roth, more than 100,000 tarot decks are sold each year. He asked Thorndike to come up with an original idea for her deck. The Roths would pay her for her

work and produce and market the deck.

"There are a lot of decks based on fairies and witches and that sort of fantasy realm," Thorndike told me. She determined that no tarot deck to date had used imagery related to the Day of the Dead, however.

Together, she and the Roths decided that the subject matter's combination of marketability and interest to her as an artist would work for their project.

She soon became in tarot in its own right, she remembered.

"I find it fascinating," she announced. "It's much more complex than I had anticipated. A lot of people think that's its fortune telling."

"What it really comes down to is that it's very intuitive. You're dealt the cards, and you're looking for answers to a specific question, but it's really about looking inward and answering with your own intuition."

As she began her tarot research, Thorndike discovered one drawback to the project. "I didn't realize at the time (I took on the commission) that a tarot deck is 78 images," she admitted ruefully.

She and the Roths decided to divide their deck into two sections. Thorndike began illustrating the 22 Major Arcana cards (roughly equivalent to face cards in a traditional deck of cards) in 2014. These have been completed

and are selling across the United States, she reported.

Thorndike works every day in her home studio on the remaining cards, the Minor Arcana. She estimates that she will finish the deck late in 2017 and that the Minor Arcana will go on sale the following spring.

I asked Thorndike to walk me through the process of creating a card. She explained that she begins by researching the card in question and taking notes.

"Each card has an element, a color, and an astrological sign, as well as the overall meaning," she said.

"As I'm doing the research, a picture usually develops in my mind of what I think the card should look like."

She then searches the internet for images that roughly correspond what she needs — a made-up face, a crouching figure, etc.

"I find something that lights my inspiration. At that point, then I can start to hit the drawing board and let my imagination go. I draw the thing out until I'm happy with it, which may take several times."

"Once I have the drawing, I transfer it to the painting surface, and then I start with the washes of paint and build up the colors. It takes me about a week to do one fully," she said.

Thorndike has long been

interested in the Day of the Dead, she told me. "For me, it's about examining our culture and how we honor our dead. ... Funerals and that sort of thing have been a hard subject. With the Day of the Dead, people are honoring their own loved ones and celebrating. We're also looking at our own mortality."

"We're all trying to find that loophole. How can we live forever? We need to accept that that's not going to happen. As we age, we realize there really is no way out. We have to become accepting of (our mortality), even if we can't embrace it totally," she concluded.

Thorndike reports that feedback about the Major Arcana from consumers has been positive. Wiccans and other spiritualists have written to let her know that she is "dead on" in her interpretation of the cards.

In addition, she feels that the project is enriching her as a painter.

"Artistically, with each one I feel like I'm growing, and as I look at the images where I started and where I am now, about halfway through, I can see how my skill has grown," she stated.

Laurel Thorndike's Major Arcana tarot cards, along with greeting cards based on the tarot art, are available locally at Elmer's Store in Ashfield and at Moldavite Dreams, Heart of Paris, and the Greenfield Gallery in Greenfield. They may also be found at www.diaelosmuertosart.com and Amazon.com

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