

Never Changing Evergreens. Divination in Europe

— Ulrike Ludwig

*There is an ancient belief – handed down to us from mythical times and firmly established by the Roman people and of all nations – that divination of some kind exists among men. [...] Now I am aware of no people, however refined and learned or however savage and ignorant, which does not think that signs are given of future events, and that certain people can recognise those signs and foretell events before they occur.*¹

Written in 44 BCE in Cicero's *De Divinatione*, this observation has since been roundly confirmed by research. Whether referred to as fortune telling, divination, or manticism, such practices are based on the belief encountered across time and space that it is possible to obtain information about future events and reveal to people otherwise hidden knowledge by tapping into a higher, transcendental power. From their diverse early origins, every culture in Europe – indeed, the world – has given rise to various forms of divination. Their forms are astonishingly numerous and diverse: astrology, tarot, reading coffee grounds, interpreting the flight of birds, consulting oracles, inspecting sacrificial entrails, stichomancy (the selection at random of passages in books), dream interpretation, chiromancy (palmistry) – as well as the belief in a whole range of good and bad omens, such as black cats and low-flying comets.

Ever since classical antiquity, moreover, European cultures have formed part of a widespread network of territories, a 'tri-continental ecumenical community', comprising Europe, North Africa, and the southwestern half of Asia. Over the centuries, this expansive cultural space was the setting for an intense process of exchange: of goods and people, ideas and books, people and knowledge.² From the 16th century, this space became intersected by wide-ranging global links, emerging at first tentatively before gathering increasingly decisive momentum in the 18th century onwards. Looking back at the history of divination in Latin Europe, these spatial relationships are often plainly evident, sometimes less so, but they never disappear altogether. Above all others, there are two objects in this exhibition that represent a tangled knot of cultural threads. Created in around 1079–1080 (472 in the Islamic calendar; cat. 36), the astrolabe of Ahmad Ibn Muhammad al-Naqqash was made in Muslim Spain in the city of Saragossa, and later re-engraved for a new owner in Italy. In the 19th century, the object was purchased at a flea market in Rome and brought back to Nuremberg.³ Another such example is a contemporary set of manga tarot cards (cat. 131), which was acquired especially for this exhibition. It is tangible evidence of a two-way flow of cultural influence: with European tarot now familiar in

East Asia as well, divinatory trends clearly also originated in Europe and spread eastwards. Furthermore, this reciprocal exchange is evidently by no means a thing of the past – an insight of topical relevance to both halves of the equation. For example, *Yijing* and *feng shui* have also become widely known in Europe in recent decades and are well-established fixtures in the fortune-telling and self-help repertoire.

Since the Enlightenment in Europe, it has become common among scholars to pigeonhole divination as belonging to premodernity. And in a contemporary context, it gets dismissed, at best, as a phenomenon beloved of the gullible – notably (as the hackneyed prejudice goes) among women and the poorly educated. Nevertheless, many forms of divination are still pursued today. Admittedly, the practice is no longer held in general esteem, and its insights are considered irrational compared to those of science. It is viewed as the less respectable sister of prognostic modelling, which in recent years has primarily drawn on 'big data' calculations to predict future scenarios or at least outline feasible outcomes. However, divination remains a perfectly natural part of people's lived realities, albeit at a subcultural level. By the same token, it is worth emphasizing at this point divination has always had its opponents and detractors. The accusation that its practitioners were ultimately out to con and manipulate their clients is as old as the cultural technology of fortune telling itself.

In order to sketch a history of divination in Europe against this background, it is important to talk about continuities and transformation, long lines of tradition, radical disruptions, and new beginnings. However, it is also necessary to note the profound notes of ambivalence that have tended to increase rather than lessen over the centuries.

Continuities

When faced with uncertainty, the urge to gain information in the here and now about future outcomes is ultimately universal. The phenomenon of divination is driven by the age-old problem of having to endure contingency. For contingency is a challenge that continually crops up, sometimes proving overpowering – particularly when it concerns existential questions. Will a loved one get over a serious (possibly terminal) illness or a threatening situation? Has the time come to buy a house or would it be better to wait? Does my partner really love me, or are they just pretending? Can I really trust my friends? Will I have children? Will I pull off what I'm working on?

In the context of divinatory enquiry, these are all questions asked time and again over the course of centuries – millennia, in fact. The practice ultimately comes down to the human urge to tame coincidence and uncertainty. This applies to times when people are confronted with a set of circumstances over which they have no influence, such as a looming catastrophe, as well as to when they themselves must make an active decision and take a risk. People can quickly feel overwhelmed by precisely these sorts of decision-making processes, and yet are forced to immediately decide between several options without being able to know whether it will result in the desired outcome. When, for example, Elector Augustus of Saxony asked during a geomantic consultation on 3 August 1576 whether Count Burkhardt von Barby was the right man to appoint as governor, he revealed the sort of uncertainty still familiar to us today inherent in all staffing decisions. Whenever during a palm reading someone asks whether someone else will survive an illness, the question itself stays the same, no matter what the fatal disease is, and in each instance the answer is sought as urgently as the last. And anyone reading a birth chart from the 16th century will recognize pronouncements relating to questions that continue to preoccupy parents today: will our child enjoy good health? What are their talents, their personality flaws? And what can we do to ensure they reach their true potential?

Of course, life today is cushioned from many of the unknowable twists of fortune that would have loomed large in years gone by: welfare programmes provide protection from the worst financial calamities, while people sign up for complex life-insurance policies and schemes in their efforts to shape or at least soften the blow of future developments. Finally, the concept of chance has without doubt increased in significance during the modern era. However, as the Covid-19 crisis has shown, insurance is by no means able to offer protection from all unknowable events; even the most fastidious plans can be thrown into disarray by the unforeseen, and it can be difficult to cope with chance when a threat becomes existential. In Germany as elsewhere in the world, there was a dire need for the most reliable forecasts possible during the early stages of the pandemic. Being in a situation where science can at best hypothesize about future developments, but having nevertheless to make far-reaching decisions on the back of such hypotheses, demonstrates once again the burden of contingency.⁴

It is hardly surprising, then, that for centuries divination was used to make timely predictions of such general threats as epidemics, famines, and wars. Even though people

had over time come to accept existential catastrophes as an inevitable part of life, they nevertheless sought to ward off the very worst. In the Book of Genesis, for example, Joseph interprets the pharaoh's dream of seven cows and seven ears of corn to mean that there will be seven fat and seven meagre years, with the latter connoting hunger, disease, and death (Genesis 41, 1–46). Joseph's achievement was to make a prediction that ensured the very worst would not come to pass, since the pharaoh now knew he had to make provisions during the 'fat' years (cat. 22).

Astrologers like Johannes Lichtenberger and Josef Grünpeck hoped to achieve similar results with their own forecasts. Living in an age of crises that informed their understanding of the world, they outlined apocalyptic scenarios marked by catastrophes of every description. However, they were also concerned with giving people ample warning to prepare as best they could for whatever upcoming wars, approaching droughts, and latest epidemics fate might have in store. The extent to which even the worst forecasts seemed plausible – credible, even – is evident, for example, in the success that met the announcement of a second biblical flood. Due to take place in 1524, the event was predicted on the basis of an extreme cluster of sixteen planetary conjunctions in the sign of Pisces. For people at the turn of the 16th century, such a cosmic rarity simply *had* to mean something.⁵ And while in the end no second Flood transpired, other soothsaying predictions of theirs did prove accurate. For centuries, predictions of wars and poor harvests, uprisings and epidemics (whether dysentery, plague, or cholera), natural disasters and conflagrations were as much a part of everyday life as people's actual experiences of such calamities – indeed in some parts of the world things are hardly very different today.

The experience of pandemic has returned to Europe with the arrival of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and has revealed that old and trusted patterns of sign reading and sense making have not entirely vanished here either. No less a figure than Rainer Maria Woelki, a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church and archbishop of Cologne, wrote the following in an op-ed for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* under a heading that, translated, reads 'For Christians, Corona Is the Moment of Truth':

These are apocalyptic times. Who six months ago could have imagined that social life across the entire planet would more or less come to a standstill for weeks at a time? For some back then, biblical images of the Apocalypse still seemed somehow fantastical, at any rate completely unreal. Yet suddenly, it's all unexpectedly very real. Seven

*billion people simultaneously face the fear of disease and death. [...] Everything we do over the next weeks and months, we do before God.*⁶

The very fact that Woelki writes what he writes and can also be understood without any difficulty points to a second, rather significant line of continuity running through divination in Europe. For while divination may well have vanished from many people's everyday lives, it remains part of our cultural repertoire. We recognize prophetic texts from their language and understand imagery that invokes the iconography of bad omens. Meanwhile, the familiar set pieces of astrology – from star signs to ill-fated 'dark days' – enjoy an established place in our thought patterns and imaginative landscapes.

A large part of this familiarity is due to many types of divination having co-existed with European societies over the course of many centuries. In addition to prophecy, which formed a substantial line in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the primary ongoing thread is the longstanding belief in the underlying significance of the changing positions of stars and planets in the firmament. The beginnings of astrology (closely intertwined with the advent of astronomy) go back as far as the second millennium BCE, to the time of the Mesopotamians, Assyrians, and the Hittite Empire.⁷ Whereas heavenly bodies that reappeared regularly were believed to exert predictable influences, unusual phenomena in the sky – comets and shooting stars, for example – were thought to have an ominous character. Such phenomena were viewed as portents – a sinister foreshadowing, an omen announcing future (and seldom welcome) developments. From the dawn of human history, people took to recording and compiling these 'special signs', as we know from the collection of Enuma-Anu-Enlil, which forms a compendium of some 7000 Babylonian omens. A very similar idea lies behind Roman literature on omens, Byzantine collections on the interpretation of thunder, and later the colourfully illustrated broadsides on portents circulated in the 16th and 17th century (cat. 41–45).

Likewise, the idea of attributing signs of character to a person's body (or specific features or signatures of the body) is an ancient practice encountered across many cultures. A particularly clear example of this is chiromantic divination, a practice that has assumed distinctly similar forms throughout history and across the world. It seems that people are predisposed to understanding not only the lines but also the elevations and folds of the hand as a 'mirror' of the potential self within. Physiognomy and chiromancy were even given a new lease of life with the publication of the *Physiognomische Fragmente* by Johann Caspar

Lavater (cat. 68).⁸ Early 20th-century characterology took the traditional understanding of the link between the body and personal fate one step further, reaching its dreadful climax in Nazi racial anthropology. Generally speaking, it should be stressed that attempts at linking medicine (and later psychology) with chiromancy and physiognomy were not uncommon in the 19th and 20th century.⁹ Of course, sense making – the interpretational frameworks employed in chiromancy and physiognomy – underwent changes, some of them considerable. Yet it is also important to highlight the elements of continuity seen in the ongoing traditions of argumentation and interpretation.

Finally, it should also be noted that it is not only particular forms and techniques of divination that have been maintained through time, but also accompanying concepts of luck and fate. Here, right through to the iconography of luck and fate, there is evidence of continuity with ancient traditions.

Transformations and Breaks in the History of Western Divination

Over the long term, there is evidence not only of continuities but also massive transformational processes. These transformations were sustained by fundamental changes affecting the whole of European culture. It is possible to identify three principal developments that marked epochal caesuras: the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, the invention of the printing press and moveable type, and the European Enlightenment.

Establishment of Christianity, Prohibitions, and the Rise of Prophecy

Ancient societies were characterized by a culture of divination that was both highly diverse and intimately connected to religious practices. However, the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in late antiquity led to a growing rift between religion and forms of divination. This would henceforth play a crucial role in society's relationship to divination in Europe, whose contested status had now acquired an entirely new dimension. Divination was now in competition with religion, while its practitioners and their clients now had to reckon with accusations of engaging in unchristian activities. Initially, the suspicion was that people were tinkering with pagan (i.e., pre-Christian) forms of divination, which equated to a betrayal of Christianity and its faith in one God. This view held

divination to be a relic of the previous era's paganism, which had no place anymore in the Christian world.

At the same time, the attitude of the Church(es) and their representatives to divination was ambivalent from the very outset. For, on the one hand, the Church rejected the idea of fate, since it contradicted the Christian notion of free will. Yet this rejection still had to be reconciled with the certainty that, for God at least, the future already existed. From the early beginnings of Christian apologetics, figures such as Justin the Martyr¹⁰ and Minucius Felix¹¹ tried to square this circle and make sense of what was ultimately a contradictory line of reasoning. One possible way out of this conundrum was through the tradition of Judeo-Christian prophesy, widely regarded as the one form of prognostication exempted from the general condemnation of divination.

Nonetheless, the major challenge of these early years was to find a way of dealing with these well-established divinatory practices, particularly the need to account for the accuracy of predictions made by 'pagans', or – even better – to prevent such predictions from ever seeing the light of day. During the late Roman period, some divinatory practices were prohibited while others were allowed to continue, and a state monopoly emerged in the realm of prediction.¹² There then followed outright bans: for example, a decree was issued by the Emperor Theodosius in 385, forbidding, on pain of death, the practice of haruspicy: the reading of entrails, particularly livers, after sacrifice.¹³ More prohibitions were to follow. It is difficult to know for certain just how long pre-Christian fortune-telling techniques continued to be practiced after the official clampdown. However, despite in later years being referred to intermittently in catalogues of prohibitions, it seems likely that many of these practices quickly fell by the wayside. Other forms remained in use, particularly astrology, although its importance as a tool for prophesying diminished.

Ultimately, however, the concept of divine foresight also provided a degree of leeway that allowed people to argue indirectly that, even outside the realm of religious prophecy, it was still possible and permissible to foretell the future. There was space to argue, for example, that beyond prophetic pronouncements, God was also wont to give signs – or, rather, portents – in the form of earthquakes and comets, for example. For why else, it was argued, would God permit otherwise meaningless phenomena unless they gave information about the future or revealed something previously unknown? From this perspective, divination was not necessarily regarded as a superstition (in the sense of a false belief). Accurate predictions were entirely possible, and

indeed always were accurate when permitted by God. This line of reasoning even looked to precedents in the Bible, as with the example of the Star of Bethlehem.

In other cases, people began re-interpreting forms of divination from classical antiquity, which occasionally resulted in strangely enduring phenomena. The most remarkable such example is without doubt the ongoing survival of the Roman sibyls. Although condemned by some early Christian apologists, others believed that accounts contained in Virgil's fourth Eclogue¹⁴ showed that the sibyls had predicted a new ruler of the world identifiable as Jesus Christ. During the medieval and early modern periods, this strand of interpretation became increasingly sophisticated, as seen in the various sibylline prophecies (cat. 9) committed to manuscript and, subsequently, print.¹⁵

While there were instances of the Church making use of divinatory expertise (deferring to sibyls and religious prophecies, for example) the prevailing attitude to divination in Christian Europe was one of fundamental ambivalence. After all, it was agreed, a divine sign could always turn out to be the product of demonic or even satanic prompting and trickery; God's will would always remain inscrutable, and the only absolutely sure way to be safe was to keep away from fortune tellers, not seek them out. Nevertheless, there was a dramatic upsurge of prophecy during the High and Late Middle Ages. This is evident from the large number of texts generally themed around the horrors anticipated with the imminent 'end of days' as foretold in Revelations, but was also marked by an increasingly critical perspective on contemporary society. As well as targeting the immorality of the general population, the texts often attacked the abuses of the Church as an institution. Indeed, the woeful state of the Church was interpreted as a sure portent of the coming Apocalypse. There was enough cause for anxiety, for example, during the Great Western Schism (1378–1417), when for at least a generation there were several indications that the existence of two rival popes in Rome and Avignon would cause a second split of the Christian Church.¹⁶ However, even outside these more exceptional periods, recurrent critical voices emerged throughout the Middle Ages, as is compellingly illustrated in the writings of Hildegard von Bingen. Another example is the work known as the *Prophecy of the Popes* (cat. 11), which even predicted that the pope and the antichrist would ultimately assume the same form.¹⁷

Translation Movement, Printing Press, and Popularization

For centuries prophecy was the pre-eminent form of divination, but with many other practices continuing to flourish in its wake, such as astrology and the casting of lots, *Tagwählerei* (tables identifying lucky and unlucky days) and the belief in portents, onomancy (interpretation of names),¹⁸ the interpretation of dreams, and many other practices. This other side of divination experienced a revival in the Late Middle Ages. Such practices often drew on customs and repositories of knowledge from the pre-Christian era, which were accelerated by the transfer of learning undertaken by scholars in the Arab world. In the 12th and 13th centuries, the key hub in this flow of learning was the city of Toledo. We know that there were numerous efforts during this phase of the Reconquista to translate works from Arabic, sometimes under the auspices of royal or episcopal initiatives. The work was possible due to the extensive contact of Mozarabs and Jews versed in Arabic with Romance-language or Latin authors. In addition to texts on medicine and mathematics, botany and philosophy, a recurrent presence among these translations were works on divination and sorcery.¹⁹

This transfer of knowledge, which proved so central to learning in Latin Europe, was already associated by contemporaries with the figure of Alfonso X of Castile. There was also a broad awareness among Europeans well into the 16th century of the major impact Arab learning had had on the development of their own fields of scholarship, and the contribution made by Alfonso X of Castile and others through their commissioning of translations. This is why, for example, the large astronomical clock of the Nikolaikirche in Stralsund, which dates from 1394, not only features a portrait of the Castilian king but also that of the Islamic scholar Alī Ibn-Riḍwān (called Hali), and the Persian mathematician and astronomer Abū-Mašār Ġaʿfar Ibn-Muḥammad al-Balḥī (called Albumasar). Indeed, the latter's numerous texts on astrology were circulated in this period.²⁰

Adding momentum to this process was the Ottoman Empire's conquest of Constantinople in 1453. This spelled the end of Byzantium, which over the course of centuries had maintained Rome's cultural and intellectual legacy in the eastern Mediterranean. The ongoing battles and conflicts in Byzantium triggered a mass migration of scholars to Latin Europe. They brought with them a host of Greek texts and intellectual traditions, including those relating to divination.²¹ The destination of choice for Byzantine scholars was Italy, which from the 14th century had emerged as an

early centre of the incipient Renaissance and Humanist movement. In the subsequent period, Italy grew into an important centre of intellectual debate, with astrology in particular numbering among the topics discussed.

In the 14th and 15th century, these various factors brought about a massive accumulation of knowledge in various forms of divination, which spread beyond Italy into Spain, France, and the region north of the Alps. As the Middle Ages gave way to the early modern period (around 1500), this period of sustained knowledge accumulation was complemented by the arrival of the printing press, the catalyst of that knowledge's dissemination and a transformative moment in Western history. The new medium's impact on divination could be seen in the enormous popularization of divination techniques that had once largely been the preserve of learned circles. This is evident most of all in the proliferation of easily understandable versions of texts, which were published in the vernacular of various languages and served to provide practical instructions for lay readers. Such texts had existed in manuscript form in the Late Middle Ages but the printing press now made it possible to reach a readership of an entirely different scale.²²

Typical examples of this new kind of publication were the small-sized and affordable fortune-telling books (cat. 35, 114, 115), not to mention wall calendars and almanacs replete with astrological predictions (cat. 54, 55, 59). Given that print-runs of such almanacs could contain several hundred – even a thousand – copies, they joined the Bible as one of the era's all-time bestsellers, while ensuring astrology's place as an established part of most people's daily lives.²³ Furthermore, printing also initially gave a new lease of life to a number of texts on prophecy – sibylline books, for example, or the more prophetically inclined writings of Hildegard von Bingen and Joachim of Fiore. However, these works were also increasingly produced as pocket-sized compilations, which could be purchased cheaply in such languages as German, French, and English. A wide variety of other such printed works were also circulating in this period, including, to name a few, broadsides about portents, *practica* texts, simple guides to onomancy, and chiromantic reference works.

Due to these new mass-media possibilities and the resultant process of popularization, divination in 16th and 17th-century Europe experienced an unprecedented golden age. More and more fortune tellers plied their trade, while divinatory products were commoditized. This not only proved to be a nice little earner for printers and publishers, but also ensured that a variety of divinatory techniques became common knowledge. Of course, the issue of literacy did present

something of a hurdle to this spread of knowledge. However, the era also saw a gradual increase in the number of people who could read, at first in towns and subsequently in rural areas too. At the same time, prophecy finally lost its pre-eminent position in the field, following its final heyday during the Reformation (which many had come to view as the end of days itself).²⁴ Henceforth, the scene was defined primarily by practices involving tabulated computations, such as astrology, geomancy, and lot books (Losbücher) for the casting of lots. These tended to aim at providing a glimpse of the more immediate future, with the erstwhile preoccupation with the end of time giving way to a greater focus on specific, compartmentalized aspects of people's everyday lives and mortal interactions.

As well as printing and publishing, this was also a prolific period of instrument building. In the German-speaking world, Nuremberg and Augsburg joined Vienna as centres for the manufacture of scientific instruments. This is attested today by the numerous timepieces, astrolabes, armillary spheres, globes, and compasses that survive in a variety of private and public collections, including that of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Even at the time, the most valuable examples of these instruments were never destined for daily use but typically for display in princely collections. Nonetheless, there was also a market for items intended for everyday use. Admittedly, there is much to suggest that items such as astrolabes played an entirely marginal role in the practice of divination. This was because their function in determining constellations had for some time since been assumed by comprehensive books of tables known as ephemerides. These tables were much better suited to astrology, as they allowed for much greater precision in predicting the position of the stars. However, astrolabes retained a highly symbolic value as professional props for physicians who practised astrology²⁵ and fortune tellers. Meanwhile, designs made from pasted cardboard or wood were also sold at more affordable prices (sadly, very few of these survive today).²⁶ Various studies in recent years have left little doubt that fortune tellers in this period acted as service providers consulted by wide sections of the population. Well-documented examples are rare, as the chances of private records from the period making it to the present day are exceptionally slim. However, on the occasions they do survive, they reveal that fortune tellers had dealings with a core clientele of several hundred people. When an important issue was at stake, a trip to the fortune teller would have been taken for granted by many people.²⁷

Enlightenment, Mockery – Yet No End in Sight

Finally, at the dawn of the modern era (from around 1800), it is possible to observe the onset of a third and thoroughly Janus-faced process of transformation. The Enlightenment marked the first time in European history when thinkers across the continent questioned whether it was reasonably possible for anyone to foretell the future at all. Consequently, public attitudes to fortune telling underwent a fundamental shift. Divination had previously been a (more or less) forbidden art, albeit one that was widely practised and generally accepted as valid. Following the Enlightenment, however, divination came to be viewed as a fallacy, a deception that no 'rational' thinking person could possibly hold true.

This belief was closely associated with a transformation in the way people understood the future. At least in certain areas of social discourse, the future – pertaining here to all humankind rather than the vagaries of each human life – was no longer seen as pre-determined. Increasingly accepted instead was a concept of the future as theoretically open-ended.²⁸ This development was intimately linked to the rise of the natural sciences, and the incremental establishment from the mid-17th century of new models for understanding the world. One example of this was the definitive break from a belief that had been effectively set in stone for many years, which held that life on Earth, from Creation to the Last Judgement, would last a mere 6000 years. Largely driven by debates on geological findings, the shift away from this belief was particularly effective at reducing the persuasive force of divination's eschatological strands, since the end of the world now began to appear every bit as remote as the Earth's primordial origins. Just as crucial was the break from models of sympathetic causation, and the increasing complexity of accumulated astronomical data. The discovery of new – and therefore potentially even more influential – planets and stars did much to cast doubt on longstanding models of astrological calculation and interpretation.

Another contributing factor to the pushback against divination emerged in the 18th century, as new forms of forecasting and risk modelling grew enormously in significance. Of particular note here is fiscal accounting, which not only emphasized the possibility of planning future developments (and hence future tax revenues), but which also used statistical surveys as the basis for sample calculations. Similarly, the fields of private and commercial risk management were characterized by parallel developments. Also significant is how the insurance industry, whose forerunners first emerged

in the 17th century, underwent enormous expansion and diversification in the late 18th century, in a development that continues unabated.²⁹ An accompanying phenomenon was the rise in the status of probability theory during the closing years of the early modern period. Drawing on work originally intended to improve players' odds of winning at gambling, decisive contributions to probability theory came from such scholars as Christiaan Huygens, Blaise Pascal, and (later) Johan Carl Friedrich Gauss.³⁰

Against the backdrop of these developments, and particularly the Enlightenment-inspired push against various forms of divination and magic, there emerged a new social attitude towards transcendental phenomena. While the era saw both the increasing delegitimization of divination in public life and the rise of new scientific forecasting methods, this by no means equated to the disappearance of divination in or after the 18th century. As a result of the era's increasingly pedagogical approach to learning, the continuing profusion of scholarship no longer written in Latin and instead in the vernacular, the growing market for the printed word, and efforts to limit ecclesiastical authority, the Enlightenment instead (ironically) created spaces for the reception and application of a new wave of Hermetic arts. It is thus possible to identify how divinatory expertise once again expanded and became more accessible in this period, this time as an unintended corollary of the Enlightenment.

Alongside longstanding forms of divination like astrology, prophecy, and palmistry, the period also saw the rise of new practices such as cartomancy (fortune telling with playing cards). Tarot cards in particular remain significant even today, although they in fact first came to prominence in the modern era, during which time they experienced several revivals, while their imagery was updated in line with prevailing tastes. However, other fortune-telling cards, such as 'Kipper' and 'Lenormand' cards (cat. 123), were also popular in the 19th and early 20th century. The latter took their name from the famous French fortune teller Marie-Anne Adélaïde Lenormand, who even had her own 'Office for Fortune Telling' in Paris (and later Brussels). Lenormand boasted an exclusive clientele, said to include such illustrious figures as the Empress Joséphine and Tsar Alexander I of Russia. However, it seems unlikely that Lenormand herself used the cards to which she lent her name. Alongside specialized sets of cards, it was also common and widespread to use normal playing cards for reading fortunes.³¹

The use of everyday items is also seen in other forms of divination: the familiar act of flipping a coin to make a decision is one example of this phenomenon, as is plucking

the petals of a flower one by one to find out if someone loves you (or loves you not). Evidence for such practices has ultimately come down to us in the form of written descriptions. Objects that can be definitively classified as having served this kind of purpose surely number among collections' truly rare items. Seen another way, this very scarcity of material evidence illustrates the mundane place these practices and their associated objects played (and continue to play) in daily life. It simply did not occur to people to single out and collect such items on the basis that they were in any way 'special'. First you tossed a coin, then you spent it; you picked a flower from the roadside, then threw away whatever had not already been plucked. Then there are cups and saucers, which obviously remained first and foremost items of tableware, even if they were occasionally used as utensils for reading coffee grounds. Known as tassomancy, the reading of coffee grounds and tea leaves was one of the new forms of fortune telling from this period. There is evidence of the activity from the late 17th century, although this form of fortune telling, with its unique power to quench mantic thirsts, only really achieved widespread popularity with that of the beverages themselves in the 18th and 19th century, as coffee, tea, and sugar became more affordable, along with the cups themselves, as more and more people could afford to drink from china made no longer in China but in European potteries. That this form of reading the future was not merely restricted to the parlour room as an amusing diversion for ladies is demonstrated by the Stockholm fortune teller Ulrica Arfvidsson, a known confidante of King Gustav III of Sweden, who based her predictions almost entirely on reading the residue in coffee cups.

Divination practised by mediums was not an innovation of this period, although an entirely new facet of the form emerged with magnetic somnambulism, a striking and modish phenomenon of the 19th and early 20th century. For the act of clairvoyance, the medium was put into a trance (usually through hypnosis) and then asked questions. There is evidence that mediums offered their services throughout Europe, although it was primarily an urban – indeed, a metropolitan – phenomenon. For example, from French newspapers in 1852 we know that there were approximately 2000 somnambulists in Paris who could be hired as fortune tellers. In 1919, the term somnambulist was to all intents and purposes synonymous with the (by then largely female-dominated) profession of fortune telling. The newspaper *Paris-Midi* even suggested that there were as many as 35,000 professional somnambulists in the city. Although almost certainly an exaggeration, the figure does illustrate

how this new form of divination had come to be viewed as a ubiquitous phenomenon. Somnambulists advertised their skills in brochures, where they claimed they could answer all questions and offer vital clues to people looking to make big wins on the lottery or stock market.³²

Emerging alongside occultism was a genuine scientific movement that set out to understand and research 'supernatural phenomenon' in precisely these terms. At public seances observed under strict 'scientific' conditions, mediums of every description would show off their skills to a spooked audience aquiver with suspense. By documenting and monitoring these seances, it was hoped that more could be learned about the world of spirits and supernatural phenomena. Here, too, the crossover between divination and pastime was fluid – although those who attended this sort of seance did report feeling unnerved for some time afterwards by the inexplicable things they had seen and experienced.³³ There is also evidence for this new rapprochement between divination and academia on a more personal level, with various scholars – particularly scientists – showing a lively interest in the occult, and engaging in discussions in a variety of forums about spiritualism, telepathy, and the wide panoply of paranormal phenomena.³⁴

Alongside the belief in the supernatural (and the associated rise of somnambulists and seances), the 19th century also witnessed a remarkable comeback of classical prophecy – and with it, a renewed preoccupation with the end of the world. There are several examples of (still existent) religious movements founded by prophets in the United States that quickly attracted adherents in Europe as well. In 1830, Joseph Smith published what became the sacred text of the Latter Day Saint movement, the *Book of Mormon*. Although less widely known today, the farmer William Miller met with similar success in the 1840s when he predicted the imminent Second Coming of Christ, forming a movement that later became known as the Seventh Day Adventists. Finally, the turn of the 20th century saw the arrival of a new religious movement, which was named the 'Jehovah's Witnesses' in 1931 by its then leader, Joseph Franklin Rutherford.

Despite divination having been repeatedly targeted for criticism by Enlightenment thinkers, despite the rise of science and new ways of explaining the world, and despite how planning for the future has become dominated by predictive models based on 'big data', divination has left its mark on modernity in a series of waves and fashions.³⁵ This is no less true of recent history. A characteristic feature of contemporary European society is the colourful mix of different forms of divination, in which long-established

practices have been complemented by the enhanced influence of traditions from East Asia, India, and the Americas. There has also been a rise in esoterica, which has been part of pop/youth culture since at least the beginnings of the New Age movement in the 1970s. The modern Western world has since been home to numerous practitioners of divination, who offer their services to the general public and furnish the book market with all manner of publications. Esoterica fairs are attended in record numbers, clairvoyants host their own TV shows, while social media channels, apps, and videos give broad swathes of the population access to such traditional practices as name interpretation, cartomancy, and reading coffee granules. In studying these trends, one must acknowledge that, although modern society may have very few open advocates of divination, divinatory practices are nevertheless in abundance – be it as playful entertainment, a serious form of counselling, or as an element of religious practice. Divination today may attract scorn and credulity, may be exploited commercially and as a means of deception – but it certainly hasn't disappeared!

- 1 Cicero/Falconer 1923, here 'On Divination', 1, 1–2 (p. 223). Written in around 44 BCE, the text reflects on whether fortune telling and prophecy can be 'real' (i.e., substantiated in reality).
- 2 Borgolte 2014, pp. 493–532, here esp. pp. 493–494.
- 3 Ausst.Kat. Nürnberg 1983, p. 5, 29–31.
- 4 Stollberg-Rilinger 2016.
- 5 Talkenberger 1990, pp. 154–335. – Zambelli 1986. – Barnes 2016, here chapter 3: The Flood.
- 6 Woelki 2020, p. 8.
- 7 Maul 2013.
- 8 Lavater 1775.
- 9 Schmölders/Gilman 1999. – Bohde 2012. – It bears mentioning that doctors like Carl Gustav Carus also published works on chiromancy and physiognomy. See, for example, Carus 1858. Carus also put together a comprehensive collection on the subject, including objects relating to hands and skulls, which still survives today. For more on this subject, see Melzer 2009, pp. 253–260.
- 10 Frühchristliche Apologeten 1913, here Justin, First Apology, 43, 'Against Fatalism'.
- 11 Felix/Schubert 2014. Relevant parts of Minucius Felix's Octavius include the section on the invalidity of divination and oracles, and his reflections on demonology (Minucius Felix, Octavius, 26).
- 12 Fögen 1997.
- 13 For more on the prohibitions outlined in the Codex Theodosianus, XVI, 10.9, see Clauss 1999, p. 452.
- 14 Virgil's *Eclogues* are a collection of ten pastoral poems written between 42 and 39 BCE.
- 15 Möhring 2000.
- 16 A first schism had already occurred in the West in 1054, leading to the religious division between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Church. Unrelated to this was the emergence of various other denominations known collectively as the Oriental Orthodox Churches. For more on this, see, for example, Marx / Pahlitzsch / Weltecke 2011.
- 17 For more on the *Prophecy of the Popes*, see cat. 11
- 18 Onamantic prediction techniques are usually based on a quite simple process, in which a firm numerical value is given to each of the individual letters in a name. A prediction is made by adding up the numerical values ascribed to the letters, then subtracting the numbers in the resultant sum to get a numerical value between 0 and 9. A specific prediction is then assigned to the residual number.
- 19 Strohmaier 2006, pp. 126–132. – Đurović/Kučiš 2017, here pp. 186–192. – Burnett 2001, pp. 249–288. – Zambelli 2012.
- 20 Abū-Maʿšar Ġaʿfar Ibn-Muḥammad: De magnis conjunctionibus et annorum revolutionibus ac eorum profectio-ibus. Printed in Augsburg (1489) and in Venice (1515). See the two-volume edition in Arabic and Latin, Ġaʿfar Ibn-Muḥammad/Yamamoto/Burnett 2000. – Ġaʿfar Ibn-Muḥammad/Hispalensis 1495.
- 21 Lilie 2003, see esp. the epilogue on Byzantium and the Occident. – Roeck 2018, pp. 544–550. – On the significance of divinatory traditions in Byzantium, see, for example, Grünbart 2018, pp. 293–313.
- 22 Ruhe 2012.
- 23 Kempkens 2014.
- 24 Kofler 2017. – Green 2012.
- 25 Schlegelmich 2018, esp. pp. 62–73.
- 26 One example can be seen in the collections of the History of Science Museum in Oxford.
- 27 An exemplary illustration of this is provided by the research on the London clairvoyant Simon Forman. See Kassell 2007 and Traister 2001.
- 28 The more scholarly debates on this topic are discussed in Koselleck 2004. – Hölscher 2016. – In recent years, studies have repeatedly demonstrated that the premodern concept of a 'closed future' had absolutely no bearing on people's approach to everyday actions, being instead reserved for the eschatological perspective on humanity's collective destiny. See, for example, Scheller 2017.
- 29 Clark 2010. – For more on the history of 'risk management', see Brakensiek/Marx/Scheller 2017.
- 30 Daston 1988.
- 31 This is immediately clear, for example, from the standard depictions of female fortune tellers giving card readings. However, instruction manuals on the practice have also survived, such as *Entdektes Geheimniß die Karte zu schlagen oder zu legen, welches im Französischen genannt wird: Dire la bonne Fortune: als ein Beytrag zur gesellschaftlichen Unterhaltung im Winter* (on the 'uncovered secret of the dealing or laying of cards, known in French as: dire la bonne fortune: A contribution to social diversions in winter') c. 1780, see Anonymous 1780. Or *Die Zigeunerin oder deren Kunst mit deutschen und französischen Karten sich und Andern wahr zu sagen* (on the 'gypsy woman or her art of seeing the future for herself and others with French and German cards') from 1856, cf. S. v. F 1856.
- 32 Minois 1998, pp. 602–603. – A late but particularly famous dramatization of this fashion appears in the silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), directed by Robert Wiene.
- 33 One famous example being Thomas Mann's first-hand accounts of seances. The experience quite evidently unsettled the author for some time. See also Costagli 2014. – For general information on this topic, see also Wolf-Braun 2009. – Doering-Manteuffel 2008.
- 34 Noakes 2020.
- 35 Daxelmüller 2005, esp. chapters 10 and 11. – Lux 2013. – Hegner 2019.