

Divining the Hand, a review by Paul Nagy

[The Art and Science of Hand Reading: Classical Methods for Self-Discovery through Palmistry](#) by Ellen Goldberg, Dorian Bergen (Destiny Books)

Contemporary divination takes many forms. In most people's mind, divination is finding out about the future. However, in the contemporary practice of divination, in astrology, tarot, and palmistry for example, emphasis is primarily on the qualities within a person's self. Our innate abilities develop

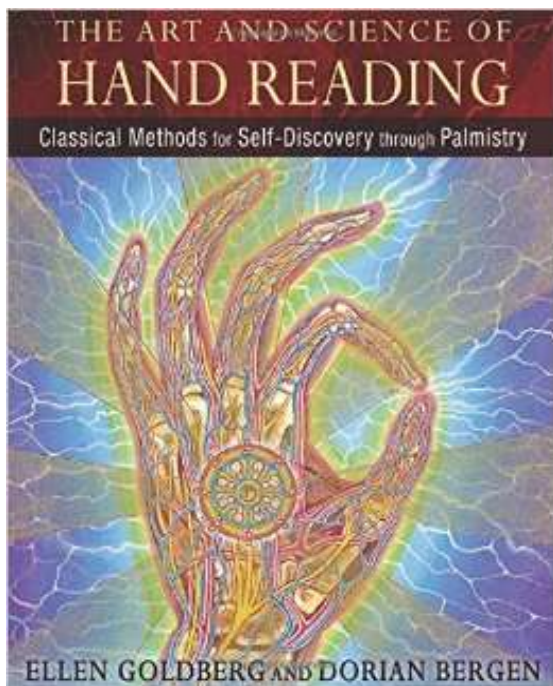


Figure 1: *The Art and Science of Hand Reading: Classical Methods for Self-Discovery through Palmistry* by Ellen Goldberg, Dorian Bergen (Destiny Books). 2016

through the arc of a life's relationships, appearing as a context of particular events or opportunities, which is usually when people generally consult an oracle for perspective and advice. Essentially then, modern forms of divination concentrate on self-knowledge rather than in predicting outcomes.

In my estimation, three common styles of divination in America today are prominent. Astrology has a ubiquitous presence. It is definitely the linchpin that unites ancient traditional sciences and symbolism with modern public forms of divination. Both palmistry and tarot are dependent in degrees upon the terminology and symbolism pervasive in astrology. There is good evidence to suppose that the tarot trumps were developed by court astrologers in Milan in the 14th century. The topographical features of the palm are named for the seven planets. These three, astrology, tarot and palmistry, represent a fair trifecta of modern Western arts of divination.

Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Astrology is definitely the bully of the three. The most widely practiced, with most elaborate pedigree and history, it currently features wild mathematical innovations in new layers of complexity by its many practitioners' embrace of the computer age and a huge, though somewhat secretive, following throughout the world. Tarot is a less frequently noticed sister art that currently is overflowing, out of relative obscurity, into a renaissance of creative ferment. Many artists now make versions of the tarot trumps as calling-cards, as a way of branding their own particular style of visual and graphic expression. Likewise, a broader segment of the public has begun to take up tarot reading as a popular social parlor game and symbolic means of self-inquiry. Here, the usual rules of play, extend beyond the commonplace of win-lose competitions, into cooperative story-making through the symbolic association in the cards' fall. The proximity of cause-and-effect becomes liquefied into a figurative, narrative soup that blurs the linearity of time and lines of self and other, to reveal and explore amazing possibilities and powerful correspondences.

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Palmistry, likewise, has many practitioners; and in many ways is the more physically intimate of contemporary arts of divination. The hand, being an extension of the body and a primary instrument of action, has been pondered and investigated as a crucial summary of a person's life. Its variant lines and mounts may well have been the first objects of contemplation during times of leisure in our Paleolithic past.



Figure 2 Paleolithic Cave Hands: Tracks in Pursuit of Game. Patagonia, Argentina, ca. 9000-8000 BCE

The hand is an unwitting witness to the whole of self, body and soul, as well as a point of fascination and comparison among family members, friends and enemies. Perhaps, even before we learned to draw or to toss knucklebones, we were wondering what the lines and bumps on the hand signified. The meridians of health and physical well-being terminate in palms of the hands and soles of the feet. It is easy to conjecture that all the later forms of divination that require practices of counting, observation of the skies, the entrails of animals, or the cracks on turtle shells, are secondary to the mysteries of the hand's unique abilities and the palm's striking features. The flexibility and shape of the fingers and hand emphatically portrays living map of the personality and physical well-being to the practiced, knowledgeable eye.

Each of these three arts have an interpenetrating vocabulary based on the characterization of the planets, astrological houses and signs. This terminological influence is obvious in the way the hand is described in palmistry using astrological terms, especially of the planets, Apollo (the Sun), Luna (the Moon), Mercury, Venus, Mars, and Saturn. It can also be seen in the names for the common lines of the palm: heart, head, life, Saturn, Apollo, and Mercury.

Each point to a series of overlapping historic, traditional, and symbolic correspondences that allow a practitioner to integrate any or all three points of view in a series complementary readings. However, most competent practitioners of any one of these arts is likely to discover what the client most needs to hear and know during a consultation. This overlapping symbolism is not merely accidental, but is grounded in the long history of divination as the first science of human inquiry. Exploring the traditions of world mythology and star-lore show how there is a universal symbolism that transcends particular histories and even our culture-zones to be written within the very nature of the stars and envelope of life that surround the earth. That may seem an outlandish statement when one puzzles over the strange pictures of the Major Arcana of the tarot to see how they relate to the folds and lines within the palms of one's hands.

[The Art and Science of Hand Reading: Classical Methods for Self-Discovery through Palmistry](#) by Ellen Goldberg and Dorian Bergen is an encyclopedic overview of the traditional methods of interpreting the hand integrated with over 30 years of clinical observation and practice of hand reading. The scope of the book is thorough, covering the pragmatic aspects of hand reading. The volume is not multicultural in discussing the varieties of palmistry as practiced in other cultures, but instead offers the in-depth

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discussion of lines and features of the hand as they relate to character and personality. Likewise, the volume is not focused on the history of palm reading, except to locate how Ellen Goldberg's practice has evolved from the work of William Benham, a late 19th century American physician, who became acquainted with palmistry as a boy and remained fascinated with the topic the rest of his life. He applied comparative methods to his observations of hands in a clinical setting, eventually recording his insights in the book, [The Laws of Scientific Hand Reading \(1901\)](#). Ellen Goldberg's work continues as far-reaching refinement of Dr. Benham's style of empirical, clinical observation and application of the classic descriptors to modern hand analysis and its correspondence to personality traits.

Ellen Goldberg has devoted a lifetime of study to clinical and characterological study of hands. She is also an adept and practiced astrologist, a skillful tarot card reader, and a psychotherapist, maintaining a private therapy practice in New York City for over 30 years. Goldberg is the founder and director of the School of Oracles and has been on the faculty of the New York Open Center since 1986. She also has a broad and deep learning in metaphysical and world religious mythology that gives anyone who consults her an opportunity for a deep and exciting reading as she can draw upon this depth of knowledge not only of the way hands betray character and talents, but also unexpected tidbits that may well surprise a client as a well-kept secret.



Figure 3 Hand Drawing by an Old Master



Figure 4 Dorian Bergen & Ellen Goldberg

It is obvious that [The Art and Science of Hand Reading](#) represents a huge undertaking for one person alone. The volume is over 500 large pages, copiously illustrated with line drawings and photographs to add visual support to the careful textual descriptions. With such a comprehensive scope, the work was facilitated by the fruitful collaboration between Ellen Goldberg and Dorian Bergen. As Goldberg says: "If I, as the chief writer and illustrator, am the Mother of this book, then Dorian is the Midwife...and what a long labor." Dorian Bergen acted as an amanuensis to the project. Daughter of poet [Simon Perchik](#), she is co-owner of the [ACA Galleries in Chelsea](#): Now the oldest multi-generational, family-owned gallery in the USA, with an environmental, socially-inclusive mission. Bergen has a special interest in documenting children's hands as they change through the lifespan.

According to Goldberg, "Dorian Bergen made it all possible. For years Dorian and I sat side by side at the computer, and she acted as my scribe, sounding board and co-editor. As a student of metaphysics for

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many years, Dorian was set (and sent by gracious fate) to be my star palmistry student. After completing my in-depth palmistry course, almost 25 years ago, she spent the following year as my class assistant. It was Dorian who encouraged me to write. For this project, Dorian wore many hats: she is the business manager of our team, head of our public relations, in charge of translations, and got us our contract with Inner Traditions.”

The book is systematically arranged like an atlas to the main features of the hand. In the introduction we are given a general map of the principal regions of the hand in palm reading and the basic terminology. Afterwards, each chapter reveals greater detail of what the various features on the hand may mean in the region that they appear.



Figure 5 Tarot artist Robert Place's palm shows the prominent mystic blush of the artist and psychic.

Learning palmistry is learning about yourself and human variation. As you learn the features of the hand, you become aware of the traditional stories of significance about the hand and its attendant personality traits. Unlike many palmistry books that provide a schematic overview, [The Art and Science of Hand Reading](#) is lavish in detail and paradoxically, the more you absorb these detailed correspondences, the more you're aware of how complex and open to creative interpretation the whole project is.

The first thing I wanted to do was to read the book as it relates to my own hand, the most telling example to initially explore. In the introduction we are given a general overview of the hand, the names of the fingers. We are taught to gauge general personality traits from the flexibility and strength of a hand's grip. Next, we look at parts of the hand and distinguish what stands out. Based on these prominent features we pay attention to how the lines cross and interconnect. Following the classic lore, and assuming we are seeing correctly, they give some idea of possibility of gifts and talents, as well as challenges and trials evident in these characteristics. There are so many levels of meaning and detail about these various features of parts of the hand, it becomes easy to

forget the forest for examination of one tree. The gestalt of the hand, it's holistic combination teases us into seeing how all these features synthesize into the person we are looking into. Goldberg suggests that reading a hand is a cooperative enterprise in that many of our insights should be phrased as questions rather than pronounced as fact. For instance, when I was trying to understand minor lines, I discovered I needed to pay closer attention what the mounts had to offer rather than assume the discussion of minor lines at the end of the book would answer my questions.

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In using this book, I suggest that one take it in small doses. For instance, reading a full chapter about the mounts or the major lines, perhaps with a study partner, so that one can compare and contrast features in each other's palm. In this way one can enjoy the different perspectives of how we see the same features so differently, initially. It is definitely a playful way to learn how to observe in great detail, and then see if the observation matches the classic characterological traits. Hand reading is a cooperative art, Goldberg reminds us. Common features are discussed as our common variance. Next, discrete features are discussed in their alternative possible interpretations. Like in all sciences of correspondence, such as the astrology chart, or a random spread of tarot cards, one begins to see patterns of reiterated messages that to the practiced eye begin to repeat themselves. We become aware of the glaring features of suggested personality features quite quickly, but the unique feature of Goldberg's and Bergen's treatment is they discuss subtle details that are not otherwise treated in contemporary palmistry manuals.



Figure 6 Dominant Hand of Reviewer

For example, in this picture, the dominant hand is square with a prominent Luna, Venus and upper Mars mounts. The combination of the Simian line, and the huge Mount of upper Mars, this hand has a palpable intensity and passion. Everything is done with everything they have. Nothing is done in half measures, and the mind and heart work in concert.

The long finger of Mercury suggests a drive towards communication and a playful relationship with words. Similarly, [The Art and Science of Hand Reading](#) creates serious fun in learning a contemporary way of hand-reading. I predict this book will be recognized as a major milestone for future palmists, to be studied and consulted by all serious hand readers for decades to come.