

# ANTIQUÉ COLLECTING

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# COLLECTING PLAYING CARDS OF THE WORLD

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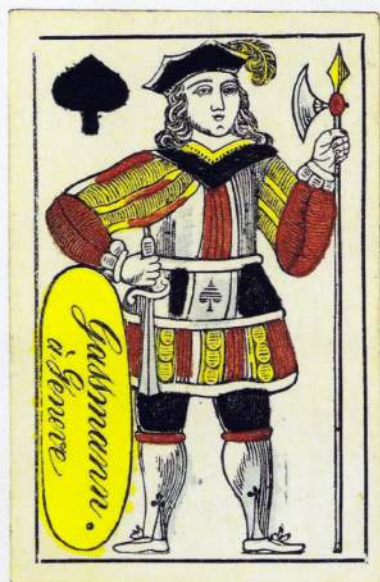


Figure 1. Court card from a Dauphiné-Piedmont pattern pack, published by Gassman of Geneva, c.1830.

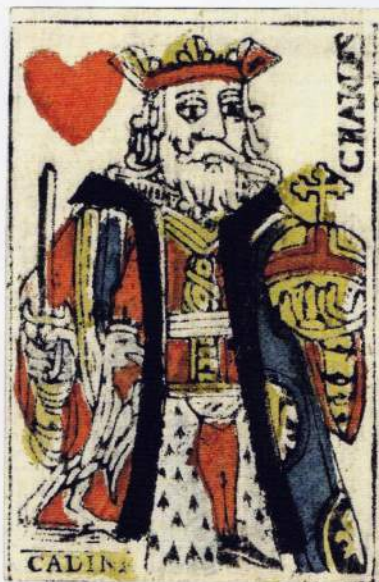


Figure 2. Court card from a Paris patterned pack, c.1785.



Figure 3. The Fool card from a Tarot de Marseilles pack, early 19th century.

There is a great deal more to playing cards than initially meets the eye. The casual layman might think immediately of that old dog-eared pack of cards lying around somewhere in the family cupboard (and assuming it's the standard British or American pattern, featuring the famous bewhiskered King, gabled Queen and dashing Knave), and wonder why on earth anyone should want to collect these seemingly prosaic, ordinary and rather everyday items?

But the history of playing cards is, in itself, a fascinating study. Playing cards have been published in many different patterns, representing different countries and geographical areas, and depicting social history, politics, war, national costume, the world of commerce and trade, and all sorts of other ideas and traditions. Playing cards can, of course, not only be highly decorative, but also be visually beautiful, and for anyone interested in graphics, design or the history of printing and illustration, worthy of considerable attention and study.

Playing cards first appeared in Europe at the end of the 14th century – at least, that is when we have the first record of their existence, often in the form of local anti-gambling ordinances banning the use of cards or dice. The story of playing cards before that date has been the subject of much controversy, argument and speculation, although the current thinking is that playing cards were

invented by the Chinese (the inventors of paper) and then came to Europe via the Islamic Empire.

Arguably, one of the most beautiful (and rarest) of all the packs was made for the Visconti-Sforza family of Milan in the 15th century; 35 of these cards are currently in the collection of the Pierpoint Morgan Library in New York. Hand-painted on a thick card, these luxurious, gilt-decorated cards are intended for the game of Tarot or Tarocchi, and have been attributed to Bianca Visconti-Sforza's favourite painter, Bonifacio Bembo. Of the original 78 cards, only four have been lost: the Devil, the Tower, the Knight of Coins (or Money), and the Three of Swords. Attractive facsimiles of this fascinating pack can be bought for a reasonable cost, and would make a worthy, if not particularly valuable, addition to any collection.

But where do you start? The sheer range of patterns, types, styles and designs must seem daunting to a new collector. Initially, an interesting collection might be made of the standard patterns of various countries and regions. Surprisingly, the suit marks can vary from country to country: France, for example, having Hearts, Spades, Diamonds and Clubs; Germany has Hearts, Leaves, Bells and Acorns; the Swiss have Shields, Flowers, Bells and Acorns; and the Italians, Cups, Batons, Swords and Coins.

Figure 1 shows a court card from a Dauphiné-Piedmont



pattern pack, published by Gassman of Geneva, around 1830. Although produced in Switzerland, this was the last gasp of an older French pattern, which was produced up until the Second World War. This pack sold for £180 at a recent Bonhams auction. Figure 2 shows another court card from a Paris patterned pack of about 1785. Note the square corners. Generally, rounded corners were not introduced until the late 19th century. The card has been printed by the wood-block method and then hand-coloured by stencil, a technique in use as late as the 20th century. Expect to pay around £350 for a pack such as this at auction.

Tarot cards might make an interesting collection in their own right. Most people assume that the mysterious Tarot has some sort of a sinister occult connection and that the cards are used solely for divination or fortune telling. In truth, Tarot cards were originally no more than a game (a development of the first playing card patterns) and, historically, have no occult reference whatsoever. The mystical attributions came later, when in 1781 a former Protestant pastor and Freemason, called Antoine Court de Gébelin, published *Le Monde Primitif analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne*. De Gébelin claimed that the Tarot was an ancient philosophical and secret doctrine holding, no less, the mysteries of the Egyptian priesthood. It's all great fun, of course, but sadly for occultists, cartomancers and other romantics, has no basis in hard, historical fact. One of the first esoteric Tarot packs was designed by the French occultist, Jean-Baptiste Alliette (pseudonym 'Etteilla') at the end of the 18th century, and was used as a new way of telling the future. As you can imagine, this new 'game' (if that is the right word) caused a sensation, and the association of the Tarot with all things occult was born.

The most famous Tarot pattern is probably that of the Marseilles pack. This is the only Italian suited Tarot in use in France, and, it is thought, came into general circulation during the 16th and 17th centuries. Figure 3 shows the Fool card from a Tarot de Marseilles pack, published in the early 19th century, after Nicholas Conver's



Figure 4. A card from the Lombardy Tarot, another variation on the game. The tax stamp dates the pack to 1885.



Figure 5. A card from a pack by Dondorf of Frankfurt, late 19th century.

woodcut design of 1760. It sold for £180. Figure 4 shows a card from the Lombardy Tarot, another variation on the game. The cards have the typical sealed or 'turned-over' edges of the Italian pack. The tax stamp dates the pack to 1885. Still on the subject of the Tarot, figure 5 depicts a card from a late 19th century pack by Dondorf of Frankfurt. The pack has beautiful chromolithographic printing of a high quality, with rounded edges. For those



Figure 6. A card from a rare Russian 'geographical' pack, published in St Petersburg, 1857.

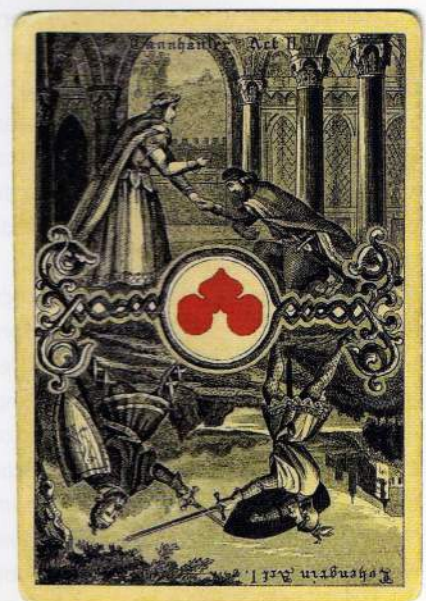


Figure 7. A card from a pack of steel-engraved German cards by an unknown maker which features scenes from Wagner's operas.





Figure 8. A card from a pack showing the traditional costumes of the Swiss Cantons, 19th century.



Figure 9. A card from a Second Empire 'Napoleonic' pack, published by Digeon of Paris in 1857.



Figure 10. The King of Clubs from a German Reichs-Karte pack, published by ASS of Altenburg during the First World War.

interested in investigating the history of the Tarot, Professor Sir Michael Dummett's well written and definitive work, *The Game of Tarot*, is particularly useful.

A rare Russian 'geographical' pack, which was offered for sale in May this year, was published in St Petersburg in 1857 (figure 6). Each of the 74 cards represents a province of the Russian Empire and depicts coats of arms, topographical views, architecture and local costume. This pack would have been used as an educational tool and, today, is prized as a curious (and valuable) relic of Old Russia. It came with its original box, too, in remarkable condition. Expect to pay upwards of £2,000, if one of these scarce packs ever appears on the market again. An interesting pack of steel-engraved German cards by an unknown maker was included for sale in the same auction (figure 7). The cards featured various scenes from Wagner's operas, including *Tannhäuser*, splendid depictions of Gothic architecture, and the mythical knight, Lohengrin, crossing a lake in a boat pulled by a swan. Another 19th century pack portrays the various traditional costumes of the Swiss Cantons (figure 8).

Historical packs are also highly collectable. Figure 9 shows a card from a Second Empire 'Napoleonic' pack, published by Digeon of Paris in 1857. The pack features members of the Bonaparte family, including the Emperor himself, his nephew, Napoleon III, and Queen Victoria's favourite, the Empress Eugenie. The queens are decorated with imperial bees; the knaves, imperial crowns; and the kings, eagles. This pack sold for £480. Figure 10 shows the King of Clubs from a German Reichs-Karte pack, published by ASS of Altenburg during the First World War. This pack was sold on behalf of the widows and orphans of the Great War, and features a double-headed portrait of the Kaiser, rich chromolithographic printing, and an iron cross motif to the

reverse. Of the same period, and by the same company, is a pack dating to 1918 (figure 11) which features famous German air-aces and aircraft of the *Luftstreitkräfte*.

Another collecting area to have a look at might be the transformation packs of the 19th century. These were illustrated packs, often comic, where the cards have been 'transformed' by using the suit signs as a basis for further illustration. For example, the Five of Hearts from a transformation pack published by MacClure, Macdonald and Macgregor in 1865, transforms the heart symbol into a pair of pantaloons, worn by a lady playing the fashionable game of croquet. Figure 12 shows the King of Spades from the French 'Jeanne l'Hachette' transformation pack, designed by E. le Tellier, and published by B.P. Grimaud in 1850. In 1472, Jeanne led the defence of the town of Beauvais against a siege by Charles le Téméraire, and the Queen of Spades portrays her brandishing an axe. Such legends, and curious historical snippets, bring the history of playing cards alive.

As you may have gathered, the subject matter for playing card collectors is almost inexhaustible. For those on a limited budget, affordable playing cards of a more recent manufacture might form the basis of an amusing collection. A quick perusal of a leading dealer's mail-order catalogue reveals playing cards of many different subjects and themes. These include pin-up glamour girl cards by the Western World Playing Card Company of St. Louis, Missouri; a Coca-Cola advertising pack; The Worshipful Company of Playing Cards' own pack, showing the Master of the Company as the Ace of Spades, and printed by Thomas de la Rue & Company in 1944; and my own particular favourite, a stylish pack of Italian playing cards designed by Luca Bruno, and published in Veglie on the anniversary of The Friends of Photography in 2005.

Figure 13 shows a Spanish Charlie Chaplin advertising





Figure 12. The King of Spades from the French 'Jeanne l'Hachette' transformation pack, 1850.

Left. Figure 11. A card from a pack featuring famous German pilots and aircraft, published by ASS of Altenburg, 1918.



Figure 13. A card from a Spanish Charlie Chaplin advertising pack, published in Barcelona in the 1920s.

pack, published in Barcelona in the 1920s. Although the condition was not particularly good, this attractive pack of cards carried an auction estimate of £200-£300. A Spanish Bullfighting pack by Gonzales of Madrid (figure 14), lithographed by Julio Garcia and designed by Pedro Maldonado, shows famous bullfighters of the day, the coin suits portray different cattle brands, while the batons picture Banderilleros, with their darts converted into neckties.

As with all collecting fields, rarity and scarcity command the highest prices, and condition is important. Where possible, possessing the original box will also add to the value of a pack of cards. For the more affordable packs, completeness is a necessity; an incomplete pack might be acceptable only if that particular pack is especially rare, or otherwise hard to find. The important court cards (and any other cards of visual interest) can be kept in folios or plastic-sleeved albums, with the remainder of the pack labelled and stored away for safekeeping.

When it comes to dating playing cards, tax-stamps (such as the one shown on the Piedmont pattern card by G. Murari of Bari, figure 15) are an invaluable source of information. Charts to help date tax stamps can be found on the Internet. Otherwise, membership of a collectors' group,

such as the International Playing Card Society, is highly recommended for collectors seeking further knowledge.

All illustrations courtesy of Bonhams Auctioneers

Luke Honey is an auction consultant, writer and Fine Art & Antiques Chartered Surveyor. Twice a year he holds auctions of chess sets, games and playing cards for Bonhams, London, the next sale being on 20th May.



Figure 14. A card from a Spanish bullfighting pack by Gonzales of Madrid.

Right. Figure 15. A Piedmont pattern card by G. Murari of Bari, showing the tax-stamp which helps to date the pack.

