

FINANCIAL TIMES

# now to spend it

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PAST MASTERS SECONDHAND BUT NOT SECOND BEST

# playing cards

A shuffle through these delightful deck designs reveals them to be hand-held works of art, says Nicole Swengley.

A surprise consequence of these economically dicey times is a renewal in home entertainment, particularly card games. A revival in the playing of bridge, poker, canasta, cribbage and whist has, in turn, fuelled a fascination with vintage cards.

Yasha Beresiner, founder of dealership InterCol London, says, "My business has increased in the current economic climate. So have prices. Back in the 1980s, I paid £400 for a late-17th-century English Popish Plot pack and £1,200 for a similar pack in the

national designs as a teenager and now I have about 2,000 packs," says Paul Bostock, a London fund manager. "I've got around 300 of the oldest English standard patterns – ancestors of ones in general use today – including a pack of Hewson English standard cards from 1680."

Literary evidence suggests that playing cards existed in China before AD1000, although the earliest domino-style paper slips bear little resemblance to European cards. By the 13th century, card-playing had travelled to India, Persia and the Middle East (an Islamic deck at Istanbul's Topkapi Palace Museum is dated around 1500), before it spread to Europe.

The first European packs were large and lavish. Italian and Spanish manufacturers invented suit signs and courtly figures in the late-14th century, and standardised versions of the major national packs had emerged by the late-15th century. Suit signs differed, however, with German cards distinguished by acorns, hearts, leaves and hawk bells, while Italian cards bore batons, swords, cups and coins. The Swiss replaced German hearts with shields, while the Spanish used clubs instead of Italian batons. Decorated court cards (kings, queens, knaves or

£93,000 (the sum paid by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art for a Flemish hunting-scene deck, c1477, at Sotheby's in London in 1983), while Beresiner paid \$20,400 for a single card, which originated from the aristocratic Italian Visconti-Sforza family around 1450, at a Christie's sale in New York in 2006. That same year Bostock paid just under £10,000 for a rare book of pre-cut, uncoloured Hewson sheets from 1675. "Packs from the 17th to 19th century are most likely to appear at auction," says Honey. "English political packs from the late-17th century are very sought after, while 19th-century English transformation

Hopewell, a Leicestershire-based chartered accountant turned parish priest, specialises in Indian playing cards.

"They are hand-painted, circular and come in packs of 96, 120, 144 and upwards," he says. "There are two main types, one based on Mughal court life, and the other on the 10 incarnations of the god Vishnu. There are recognisable styles from different regions but no two cards are identical. I went to India to photograph and interview the craftsmen who still paint the cards before they are totally supplanted by the Anglo-American pack we know so well."

Modern limited issues like these do hold their value, although John Sings, member of



Above: a hand-coloured London-published pack, c1670-85. Below: a 16th-century design by Peter Flötner, with leaves as suit signs.



Top: a classic 19th-century jester card. Above: Queen Anne playing cards (c1707) depicting the Duke of Marlborough's campaigns, together with case.

## German cards are distinguished by acorns, hearts, leaves and hawk bells.

cards, in which the suit signs are woven into the artwork, are also rising in value."

An English transformation pack, c1865, sold for £600 at Bonhams in London last autumn, while an Italian Piedmont pack, c1870, fetched £300. "Complete decks from the late-17th and early-18th centuries sell for between £3,000 and £10,000, but you can buy a good pack from 1820 to 1880 for £300," says Beresiner.

Dating can be tricky as some designs were reissued as facsimiles after their original production, and fakes are not unknown. Stylistic cues (double-ended cards date from the late-18th century; rounded corners appear post-1875), printing methods, manufacturers' marks and tax stamps all help to identify age. Complete packs command higher prices, as do unusual productions, such as court cards from the French Revolution which have the crowns removed.

Bostock believes the best sources are dealers and recommends joining the International Playing Card Society or English Playing Card Society. Other countries have their own clubs, such as the Chicago Playing Card Collectors, L'Accart in France and Asescoin in Spain. Online dealers are also worth a look, while trading on eBay comes with the usual caveats.

Most collectors specialise in a theme, period, manufacturer or country. Jeff

the International Playing Card Society and owner of the Games et Al dealership, says, "You really need to look earlier than 1939. Our advice is to specialise and buy the best. Dirty cards, unless 300 years old, are not a great addition and volume purchases can result in little return when resold."

For those who collect for interest rather than investment, the historical aspects are a thrill. Dudley Ollis, a former trade association executive with a 5,000-pack collection, says: "It's wonderful having an old card in your hand and thinking, 'Napoleon could have played with this!'"

late 1990s. Today, collectors would pay anywhere between £3,500 and £5,000 for it."

"Eighteenth and 19th-century cards have risen in value over the past few years," says Luke Honey, chess and games consultant for Bonhams, which holds biannual sales of cards and games. "Enthusiasts should collect now while prices are still affordable."

Still, graphics often provide the initial hook. "I became interested in the different

jacks) originated in France around 1450-1470.

Card artwork simplified when the French redesigned their suit signs (spades, hearts, clubs and diamonds) as black and red silhouettes during the 15th century. Carved wood blocks were replaced by stencils, making production quicker and less expensive, and thousands of decks poured out of Rouen, a big print-making centre. They were exported to Britain and on to the US, where the joker card evolved during the 1860s and arrived in Europe, along with poker, in the 1880s.

Today, rare Renaissance decks are snapped up by museums for as much as



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