

# Card Design: French Playing Cards

**F**rance was one of the small number of countries where playing cards were in use before 1400. They are of particular relevance to those of us that use the English or international standard cards, because the English system was based on the French. More frankly, when the English started making their own cards, they copied French ones.

From the earliest cards, French sets differ according to which region they were in. There are different patterns in Lyons, Burgundy, Languedoc, Rouen, Paris, and so on – around ten in all depending on whether small variations count as a different pattern or not. The English tended to import cards from the Rouen area, and those were the specific pattern that the English chose to copy, starting in the seventeenth Century. Unfortunately, we do not know of a full pack of Rouennais cards to use as a comparison with the Early English.

We cannot show all the variations, but the two cards below illustrate some of the diversity. They are both designs that are not familiar – in other words they did not transfer over to the English pattern. The Queen with the elaborate sleeves is from a patten called Dauphiné from the area near Geneva and dates from around 1848 (this date appears on the back of this card). The Jack from the Auvergne region looks just as expect a knight to look – wearing a helmet and armour. The initials on the shield (bottom left) would be the maker's.



*Dauphiné Queen, 1748.*



*Auvergne Jack c. 1690s.*

The other interesting thing is that the regions copied some of the cards from each other. Sometimes they flipped from right to left – initially this is surprising, but we must remember that the card outlines are printed with a wooden block. It would be natural for the blockmaker to copy a new design straight from a card, but this would then reverse when the block was printed because the block is actually a mirror image of the design that it prints. Secondly, a number of figures change suit – some regions' King of Hearts look like others' King of Clubs. This is actually an important point. It is often asked if there is any significance to the fact that some courts face left, others right, or whether the Courts have any particular meaning. Given this widespread reversal of figures and these changes of suit, it is correct to

conclude that the particular figures that we have ended up with are the result of many accidental choices throughout many years of development.

For the French pattern, the rest of the story is strangely simple. In 1701 – quite soon after the English began making cards – the French passed laws to standardise all the regional patterns, making it easier for tax collection. There was one way that each card had to look, and that was it. In 1780 the Paris pattern was adopted as the standard for the whole of France. From 1780 onwards, the French pattern effectively ceased to evolve – although the cards became double ended and indices were added both around 1880.



*Jack of Spades: Early Paris pattern, maker unknown c. 1680.*



*Jack of Spades: Standard French, pattern by B P Grimaud c. 1980.*

The early cards like this Jack with his eager dog certainly have a lot of character. The modern card has retained its traditional name – Hogier – France being the only country to have this feature. However, much of the original charm has been lost. Looking at the old cards in all the regional patterns and looking at the one modern standard, one feels that French card making lost out through the creation of a single legal standard design. ■

Paul Bostock, May 2017

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