# Card Design:

The History of Standard English Cards

Playing cards first appear in Europe from around 1377 in France, Germany, Italy and Spain and possibly Flanders. The French makers soon had a number of regional patterns, and some figures were quite often copied from one region to another and were often mirrored (laying to rest any thoughts about whether facing left or right has any special meaning). The English first encountered playing-cards imported from the Rouen area of France, and it is this pattern that our cards are based on.

We can characterise their subsequent history in four stages:

1. Adoption and Evolution

From 1600 to 1765, the Rouen pattern was copied and established as the single pattern used in England. The illustration below shows a Queen of Hearts from a pack from before 1680, and the same card from around 1765. The differences are easy to see. The early court cards are quite artistic portrayals of real people. As the block makers copied and re-copied the blocks, the designs become quite stylised – in some places it has become unclear what the different coloured areas depict. So it is quite fair to say that our familiar and rather geometrical design is the simple result of poor copying.
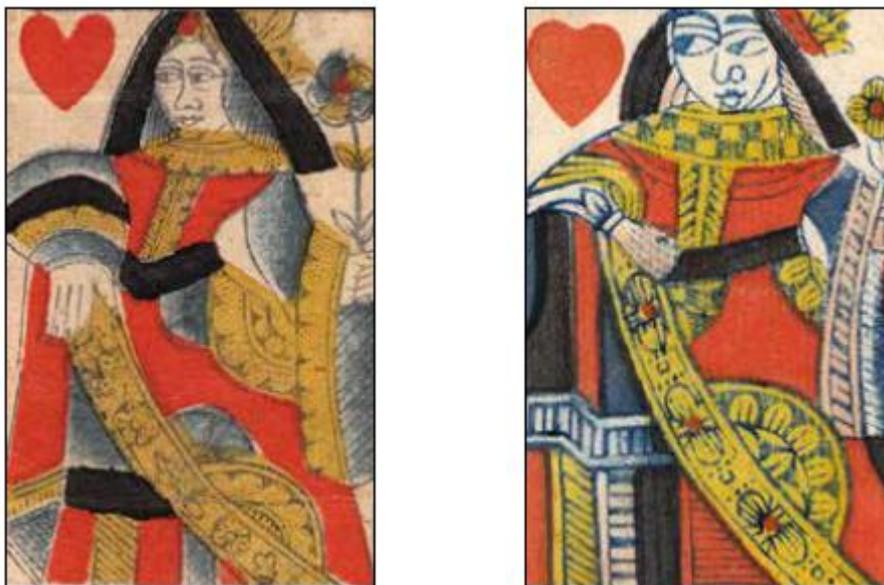
Changes in the Queen of Hearts from 1680 (left) to 1765 (right).

2. The Old Standard

From 1765 to 1840 or so, the pattern remains relatively stable.

You may recall from a previous article in this series that 1765 is the year in which the fancy Ace of Spades was introduced for tax purposes. In this period card printing by wood blocks improved considerably, and in 1832 Thomas De La Rue brought in lithographic printing – but had to keep to traditional designs.

*Queen of Hearts, by De La Rue
from 1832 onwards.
The first use of lithographic printing.*

*Cards by Goodall & Co, 1900.
Compare these with the De La Rue
pack from the 1830s shown
above. Revolution indeed!*

3. Revolution!

In From 1840 to 1900 several major innovations came in. Firstly, De La Rue came to realise that his new lithographic printing could be used to create colourful backs. These were an immediate success. Soon after this, double-ended designs, the defining feature of the new cards, appear starting from the late 1850s. Then in the 1860s Jokers and index signs (suits and values in the corners) are introduced into American packs. These reach the English design soon after. The last change happened very gradually – most cards now had rounded corners. This was another change waiting to happen (square corners fray easily), but actually rounding off the corners required development of specialised equipment. By 1900 the playing cards in use are instantly recognisable and indistinguishable from those we use today.

4. The New Standard

From 1900 this new (i.e. double-ended) standard has remained unchanged. However, far from being business as usual, the industry has transformed. The period from the mid-1850s to perhaps the 1950s saw a massive increase in card playing and a transfer of card making from small family craft business to industrial production. This came about through considerable reductions in taxes on cards and new printing processes capable of making more cards more cheaply. The printing of card backs also made cards popular for marketing, souvenirs and so on. In this era, we also see plenty of experimentation with non-standard cards, including artistic re-drawings of the courts and completely abstract designs, and packs containing photographs and drawings. Provided these have corner indices, they can be used, in principle, for playing card games.

What of the future? Two new things are happening. The first is that digital design has encouraged a new generation of designers and artists to create cards, some standard and others highly inventive. The second is that more and more games can be played online, so perhaps a future writer may be able to talk about the history of the digital standard pack. ∎

Paul Bostock, October 2017