Card Design:
Transformation Cards

Transformation cards are a special type of playing card where an artist has transforms the pip cards into a set of pictures. Given an example, the idea is self-explanatory, so you may want to look ahead at the illustrations.

The practice of transforming cards began in Germany in 1801. The first set of cards was a group of sixteen designs – not yet a whole pack – with illustrations for Hudibras, a popular satirical poem by Samuel Butler. Once the idea had been noticed, it spread quickly in Europe and by the 1820s, thirty or forty sets had been designed. The early designs encompass various ideas from a 'Cotta' set depicting figures from classical antiquity (Cotta being the publisher, again in Germany), via literature to outright comedy. Perhaps the most famous comical set is called 'Cartes a rire', produced in Paris around 1819. The four of hearts is a delightfully mischievous picture of four cherubic boys on potties…

The three of diamonds from 'Metastasis' card, 1811. Made by S&J Fuller with illustrations by Nixon

One of the first artists to produce a full set of cards was John Nixon. Card makers S & J Fuller of Rathbone Place, London, produced a set designed by Nixon, on sale from 1811. The pack was called 'Metastasis, Transformation of Cards' and is extremely well made. The pip cards typically feature people in cartoons while the court cards are figures from European Royalty and society, equally portrayed in cartoons. The example shown is typical: a waiter looks forlorn as he contemplates that there will be nothing left for him to eat. The faces and the plate are also the three suit signs in their correct positions on the cards.

Once this form of design had become known, a more unusual variant became possible. Instead of producing a set of designs for production of a run of packs, an artist could buy a pack of cards and illustrate them by hand. Watercolour has been used quite often for pictures, with any additional captions written in. An example is illustrated below. These cards have been hand-illustrated with designs painted directly onto an English pack made by Goodall around 1880. This one is now in the Fournier Museum, Vitoria, Spain. The Museum has issued a facsimile edition – an excellent example printed on the correct slightly rough card. The illustrations (see next page) come from the facsimile.

Transformation cards continue to inspire both artists and card makers. In the late twentieth Century two particularly memorable sets were made – both coming out in 1992 in fact. 'The Key to The Kingdom' was a very high quality set, beautifully designed by Tony Meeuwissen and issued by Pavilion books. The set came as a book of verse illustrated with pictures from

the set of cards accompanied by the transformation pack itself. The text indicated that there was a mystery contained within, and a challenge was issued for the first solver to claim a prize of a golden key (one of the designs in the set) and $10,000.

Hand-painted transformation cards, from around 1880, Fournier Museum facsimile

The second set was issued by Friends of the Earth. Fifty-four artists were commissioned to design cards including two jokers, with the theme of the charity's ecological work. The cards were produced by Andrew Jones Art and printed on recycled card. This was a popular set, and the charity also held a successful auction of the original art.

Transformation cards are very much sought after by specialist collectors, and it is easy to see the attraction of these colourful and often entertaining playing-cards. ■

Cards from 'Art for the Earth' made in 1992 by Andrew Jones Art for Friends of the Earth
♦10 by Gregory Alexander, ♦5 by John Gillo and ♠10 by Jonathan Langley

Paul Bostock, July 2017