

# Card Design:

## The Joker

### An American Addition to the Pack

The Joker was first added as an extra card in American packs, specifically those made in New York around 1864. At that time, Euchre was a popular card game – imported from Germany. In Euchre rules, the highest ranking card is the Jack of the trump suit ('Right Bower', a corruption of the German



*Joker from New York c. 1864  
Quite possibly the first Joker.*

bauer) followed by the other Jack of the same colour ('Left Bower'). The other cards then rank as expected. Someone then had the idea of a variant, 'Railroad Euchre' in which there was a 'Best Bower', an additional card outranking all the others. In some versions the card is actually marked 'Best Bower' and in others 'Joker'. As far as we can tell now, these two variants arrived at the same time. Joker has become the name of choice, probably because it is less specific to one game, and perhaps as it is much more catchy.

### More Jokers

Incidentally, the idea of an additional card was not exactly new. English manufacturers occasionally included a blank card from the early 1800s, which was intended to be used as a replacement so that the pack could continue to be used if a single card went missing. The new idea was that the Joker was an integral part of the game. Nowadays, in a new pack you may sometimes see both a Joker, or two Jokers, and additional blank cards – and even bridge scoring tables.

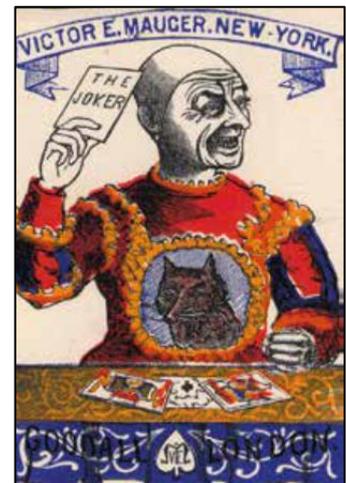
Once the Joker appeared, it began to take on a slightly different character. For games other

than Euchre, it was possible to create light-hearted variants in which the Joker could be used as a 'wild-card', meaning that a player could assign any value, so as to maximise the value of all the cards held. It was also possible to assign the Joker a special role – as the highest or lowest valued card in the trump suit or in the whole pack. A second Joker was added specifically for Canasta. According to Chambers card games, Canasta was invented by, 'bored women in a club in Montivideo, Uruguay around 1940.' By the 1950s, Canasta was briefly more popular than bridge in the USA.



### Jokers in England

The first English Joker was made by Goodall. This arose from a collaboration with an American, Victor E Mauger. Mauger was a distributor and seller of cards but was not a card maker, so he bought supplies from Goodall, who were at the time the largest playingcard manufacturer in the world. As a result of their American connection, Goodall were introduced to the Joker ahead of their English competitors.



*Ace of Spades showing  
the collaboration between  
Goodall and Mauger.  
Joker from Mauger c 1870,  
made by Goodall & Co.*

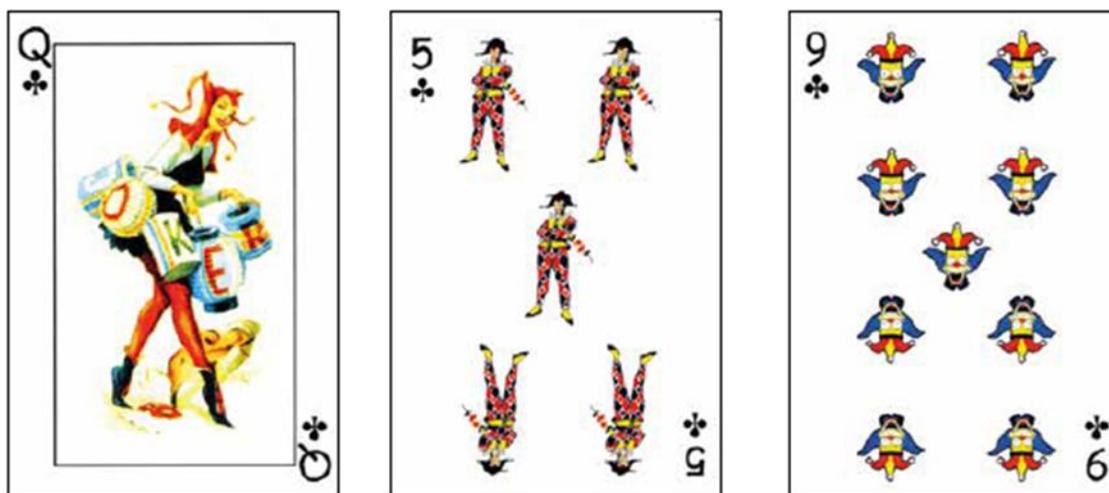
## Variety

One of the appealing qualities of the Joker is that it does not have a standard design. Instead, manufacturers have designed their own Jokers to give their packs a more distinctive character. These are often slightly humorous, colourful and occasionally a little sinister. Below we show a sample of Jokers showing some of the variety. As a result, there are now collectors who collect just Jokers – taking out the Joker is bemoaned by collectors of whole packs, of course!



*An international selection of modern Jokers: [L-R] Obergs (Sweden), USPC Bicycle (USA), Modiano (Italy)*

Lastly, the American collectors Club is called 52+Joker, a name that recognises the significance of the Joker as a truly American addition to the pack. Each year the Club produces a deck for members only, and one such deck featured Jokers on every card. This is an entertaining and clever design, some of the cards are shown below. ■



*Examples of Cards from 'Jokers 1' by 52+Joker*

Paul Bostock, August 2017

The author is a Court Assistant in the Worshipful Company of Makers of Playing Cards – see [www.makersofplayingcards.co.uk](http://www.makersofplayingcards.co.uk). Many more sets of cards are illustrated on the author's website [www.plainbacks.com](http://www.plainbacks.com)