

Card Design:

Italian Playing Cards

Italian playing-cards arguably have both the most interesting and the most baffling set of patterns. There is no national Italian standard – not surprising if we recall that modern Italy emerged from a re-unification process that was completed in 1870. Before that, different regions had different connections – for example, in 1700 the Habsburg Empire encompassed the South of Italy (roughly from Naples southwards), Sardinia and Sicily as well as Spain and much of Central Europe around Austria (and beyond). This is enough history to account for the variations we see.

So, in place of a national standard we see a dozen or so regional standards as follows (using the Italian designations because if you buy Italian packs, these regional names are what you will see on the boxes):
Bresciane,
Genovese, Lombarde,
Milanese, Napoletane,
Piacentine, Piemontesi,
Romagnole, Sarde,
Siciliane, Toscane (or
Fiorentine), Trentine,
Trevisane and Triestine.



The Bresciane pattern (the narrowest of the Italian designs) made by Modiano. The page, cavalier and king of coins and the five of swords. In this pattern, the five of swords has a distinctive interlaced arrangement (one of the five is vertical and black).

These patterns are all genuinely different. A majority have Spanish suit types (swords, cups, coins, batons) and the remainder have French suits (spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs). Most of the cards are a little smaller than bridge cards, some are comparatively narrow – half as wide as they are long. Some are double-ended while a majority have retained full-figure courts in contemporary packs. The majority do not have corner indexes, but a few are numbered. Some of the French suited cards have a second male figure rather than a Queen (as occurs conventionally in all the Spanish-suited cards).



Contemporary Neapolitan pattern, The page, cavalier and king of batons and again the five of swords, here more conventionally arranged. Cards by 'International Toys', Palermo, Napoli.

By way of additional identifying features, The Bresciane pack has 52 cards, while all the others have 40 (seven numerals and three courts). Some patterns frame all the cards, some have no frames and some frame just the courts. For experts, some of the numerals have an

interlaced pattern for the swords and batons (see the image above), while the remainder show five smaller swords each separate, as in the Spanish pattern (see the first image left). The interlaced pattern is unique to Italy.

With this regional variation in mind, the easiest way to get an idea of the Italian cards is to see some more examples, and I have selected more patterns that show the diversity.

Around two thirds of Italian regions use the Spanish suits. Of these, the majority have retained their original single-figure courts. The next example is the Napoletane pattern, particularly popular for the game of Scopa played in and around Naples. This is a traditional pattern with Spanish suits, no indices, no frames and full figure courts. This pack has 40 cards, each suit having pip cards 1-7 and three court cards including a cavalier, again as in the Spanish pattern.

Next is another Spanish suited pack, the Sarde pattern from Sardinia. This is a much more elaborate design, and the cards all have a frame and a number. Again the full set is 40 cards, here marked as 1-7 for the pips and 10-12 for the courts.



*Sarde Pattern – this example by Modiano of Trieste c1955.
The page, cavalier, king and ace of cups.*

The last of our selection are Toscane – cards from Tuscany (alternatively referred to as Fiorentine in Italian). These have French suits (ie the same as ours) and particularly fine looking court characters, looking perhaps like Shakespearian actors. The courts are framed, the pip cards are not. There are no indices.



*Toscane (or Fiorentine) pattern. Jack, Queen and King of Spades and
Four of Hearts showing the maker, Dal Negro of Treviso, from the 1990s.*

Italian card makers continue to make all the regional patterns, and they also produce English/International standard bridge and poker style cards for use at home and for export. Names include Dal Negro of Treviso, Modiano and Cambissa of Trieste and La Milano of Milan. ■

Paul Bostock, March 2018

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