

# Card Design:

## Luxury Playing Cards

Like many consumer goods, playing cards come with a variety of quality levels, from the very basic, via the standard to the luxury productions. This has been the case in England since Victorian times, possibly earlier. By the end of the nineteenth century, card makers had very basic ‘fourth quality’ cards – often just red and black, cheap and intended for games requiring more than one pack. The three other qualities ‘Merry Andrews’, ‘Highlanders’ and ‘Great Mogul’ (the best) offered increasingly weightier card stock and smoother finishing. The strange names evolved from the branding of older cards, when each of these specific names was associated with an individual maker.

There are two different types of luxury card sets. One that will be familiar to those who play informal bridge is where the card maker has produced a high quality set with additional scoring pads and pencils and perhaps a rule book, all tastefully boxed up and co-ordinated – as in the example shown below.



1963 High quality Bridge Set by De La Rue with two packs, scoring pads, pencils and a rule book (quality control slip also shown).

If the set is not standard but more artistic, the maker may issue a book to accompany the cards. A favourite of mine is a set made by Piatnik and called ‘Arnold Schoenberg’ playing cards. This is not a simple commemorative set, surprisingly perhaps, but cards that were designed by the Composer. There is a booklet inside written by his daughter, explaining how he enjoyed drawing and painting, and how he chose to design a set of cards.

We have encountered a couple of other luxury sets earlier in the series. The Reproduction of the sixteenth century German Hunting cards – again made by Piatnik – comes with a luxury cloth box and a booklet explaining the history. We also saw the ‘Key to the Kingdom’ which was a Competition based on a set of specially designed playing cards and an accompanying book, which led to a puzzle to be solved.

A different luxury type is where a luxury brand produces a set – the cards will be made by a familiar maker, but the packaging and any additions will be from the luxury brand itself. Many of the fashion houses have produced sets, such as Louis Vuitton, Hermès, Prada and Tiffany. Tiffany produced a brilliant set of transformation cards in America as early as 1879. More affordable is a 1974 re-issue with the same court cards – see below.



Transformation Cards by Tiffany & Co. Designed in 1879, this is the modern re-issue of 1974.

One rather more risqué item was made by the lingerie company Agent Provocateur. This comes with a rule booklet for games to try out, including strip poker, a book with a short – but very steamy – story and of course the cards and poker chips for the games.



*Agent Provocateur c 2005: Box (made as a book) and contents.*

Lastly and notable for the sheer scale of its presentation, we have The Oscar Wilde Playing Cards made in 1986 By Richard Ellman and R Fanto. These were a set of cards depicting both the real events of Wilde’s life and some of the characters from his fiction, with each suit having an appropriate theme.

The picture below shows this wonderful box set with two packs and a book explaining the designs, together with a small selection of the illustrated cards.



*The Oscar Wilde Playing Cards, 1986, by Richard Ellman and R Fanto.*

Luxury cards, then, are a distinctive and interesting category that some enthusiasts find a pleasure to own. ■

Paul Bostock, April 2018

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)