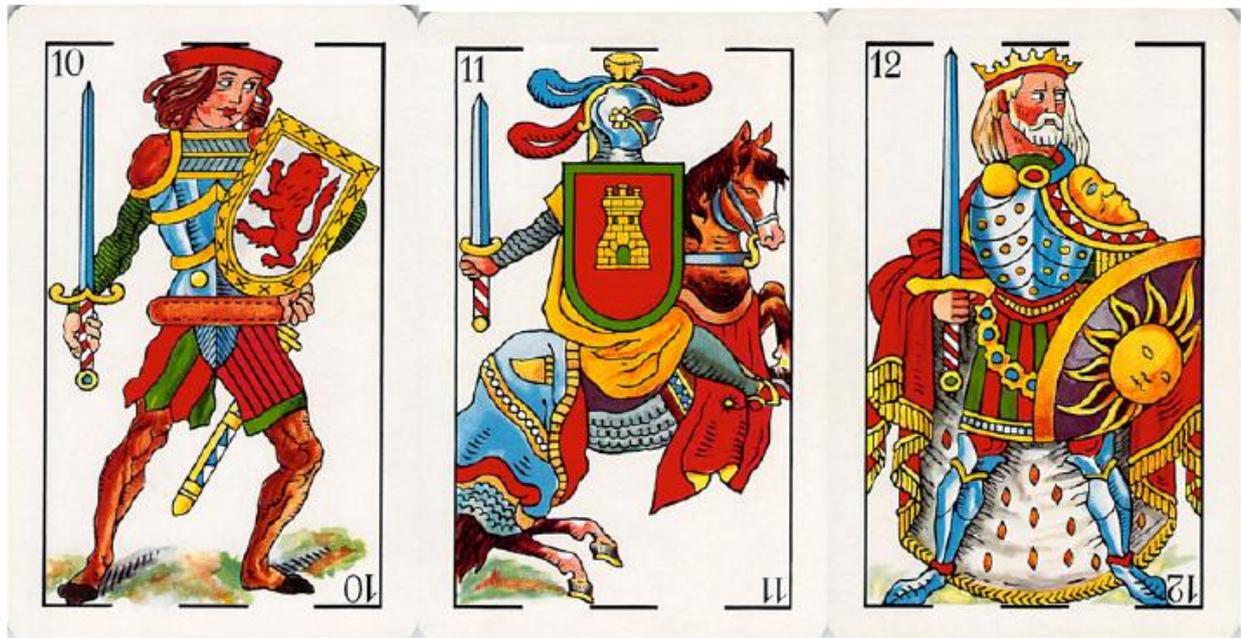


## Card Design:

# Playing Cards from Spain

Spain is among the group of countries where we have the earliest evidence of playing cards being, in each case they arrived in the late fourteenth century. A bridge player encountering Spanish cards for the first time would immediately notice how different they look. The Spanish pack will normally contain 48 cards – twelve in each of four suits. The suit designations are different – they translate as Swords, Cups, Coins and Batons (corresponding with Spades, Hearts, Diamonds and Clubs). The court cards are different too, the Spanish cards have a mounted ‘Cavalier’ in place of the Queen. If, like ours, the cards were initially used for gambling perhaps it was thought inappropriate to have a Queen in the deck?



*Modern (1970) Spanish standard set by Heraclio Fournier of Vitoria, Spain. These are the three court cards in the suit of swords. The King is numbered 12, as there are twelve cards per suit. The figures have not been made double-ended. The 11 is a Cavalier where we might have expected a Queen. The breaks in the frame around the figures indicate the suit.*

Unlike most of the world's patterns – notably the English, French, German and some Italian patterns - Spanish cards never became double ended. There is therefore no distinction in pattern between the ancient and the modern cards. The cards illustrated below come from the City of Toledo and their date is 1574. The author does not have the good fortune to own an original set, but these are a wonderful 1998 reproduction by the Museo de Santa Cruz de Toledo printed by Comas.



*Cards by Phelippe Ayet, from Sixteenth Century Toledo. Left to right, the Cavalier of Swords (compare this with the modern example above), Ace of Coins and five of swords. The Maker's name appears on each of these, and several other cards.*

## Regions

The Spanish continue to make cards to this day, the most successful being Fournier of Vitoria (in Northern Spain), whose cards sell well in Britain. Fournier are now allied with the United States Playing Card Company and produce International as well as Spanish cards. Fournier's native pattern is 'Castilian', and this has become one of two standard patterns commonly used in Spain itself (the other being the 'Catalan' version). The so-called 'National Pattern' – the most traditional - is now actually made for export, mostly to Central and South America.

Some experts list regional variations of these patterns, but these are not as clearly differentiated as we see in Italy (soon to follow in this series) and, without wishing to be controversial, sometimes extra categories serve to confuse more than they help.

Spanish makers have of course produced non-standard cards, usually in the 48 card format of course. Examples include subjects like Don Quixote, Spanish history, Regional costumes and satire and humour.

## Around the World

The Spanish Pattern is important beyond Spain too. From early on, cards of a very similar style appear in several of the Italian regional patterns and in southern France (where they are referred to specifically as 'Aluette' cards). To be careful, it would not be correct to say that they were adopted in those regions. More accurately, the national boundaries have evolved over time, and the areas using Spanish playing cards from the outset would have been the Mediterranean areas of what are now Southern Spain, Southern France and North Western Italy.

As you would expect, the Spanish pattern has been adopted throughout most of Central and South America too. At the same time, the English or International standard would be easily recognised and widely available because of the popularity of bridge, poker and so on. There were Mexican makers of playing cards in the 16th Century, and playing cards have been made in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico and Uruguay (and possibly elsewhere).



*Mexican Cards c 1940, full of local character.*

Paul Bostock, January 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)