

# Card Design:

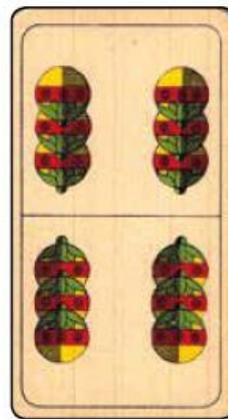
## Cards from Germany and Eastern Europe

Playing cards were in Germany by the end of the 14th century and the oldest set still preserved is the 'Stuttgart Deck'. Analysis of the paper and water marks suggest that it was made within the years 1427-1431. The cards are a 'hunting pack' (one appeared in BRIDGE 170) and they are large, hand-painted and finished with a variety of metallised pigments that make them shine.

The German suits are leaves (informally grün for green), Hearts (rot for red), hawk-bells and acorns. While the early German decks had 52 cards, it is now standard to see packs of 36, sometimes further reduced depending on the game being played.

The composition of the suits has evolved uniquely; while the Ace took the highest value in many European games, in Germany the Daus (meaning 'Deuce') was promoted and the Ace vanished. The remaining cards run from six upwards. The courts are unter, ober and König (underknave, overknave and King).

The tens usually carry the latin numeral X and often show a flag. So in the standard pack of 36 cards, the German suit runs upwards in values as follows: 6, 7, 8, 9, X, Ober, Unter, König, Daus. No doubt, for the players of



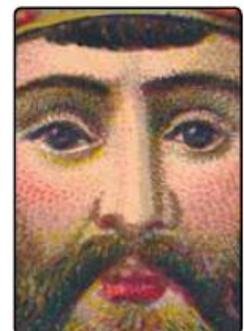
Traditional standard Bavarian cards by FX Schmid. Note the suit signs and the elaborate 'Daus' of hearts which ranks highest (and has a tax stamp).

German games this is all second nature.

## Excellence in Printing

German cards stand out for another reason: for most of their history they have been made with the highest standards of quality and artistry. The first use of wood-block printing anywhere was German and was specifically for making playingcards. German makers were also pioneers of metal engraving. While the English maker Thomas De La Rue was the first lithographic printer in 1832, the German makers adopted this technique and took it to its highest level.

Bernhart Dondorf, widely regarded as the finest card maker of this era, began in Frankfurt in 1833 as a supplier to the printing industry. He started making playingcards in 1840 using a combination of engraved steel



Four Continents by B Dondorf, c1870. Note the illustrated backgrounds on numeral cards (the 4S) and the detail and subtle colouring in the magnified image of the face. (From the collection of Barney Townshend.).

plates and colour lithography. The company made both standard designs and more elaborate and decorative cards. One of many highly-regarded patterns is their 'Four Continents' made from around 1870, shown in the images below. This had French suits (presumably with export in mind).

In 1933 the Company celebrated its 100th anniversary and made a special pack with a particularly lavish design. The card faces used thirteen colours, which meant producing and aligning thirteen lithographic stones. The cards were newly drawn featuring medieval court figures with a heroic and noble bearing. Playing-card legend says that this pack brought the company to its end, particularly as it was made during the difficult economic conditions facing Germany in the 1930s. The truth is that the company was already in the process of being taken over by Flemming and Wiscott, but the legend is compelling and it has stuck.



*Dondorf 100th Anniversary pack, 1933. The King's face shows the extraordinary fine detail and colouring. From the collection of Barney Townshend.*

## Eastern Europe

The same German suits are used in Austria, Hungary and the Czech Republic; the Swiss pattern is a variant with bells, acorns, shields and roses as its suit signs. These Eastern European cards have their own distinctive character as seen in the fairly modern example from Prague below. The demonic Daus of acorns and seated Kings are typical.



*Modern version of the traditional Prague Pattern, Czech Republic. Obchodny cards, 1970s.*

We thank Barney Townshend for images and information on Dondorf.

Paul Bostock, May 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)