

Card Design:

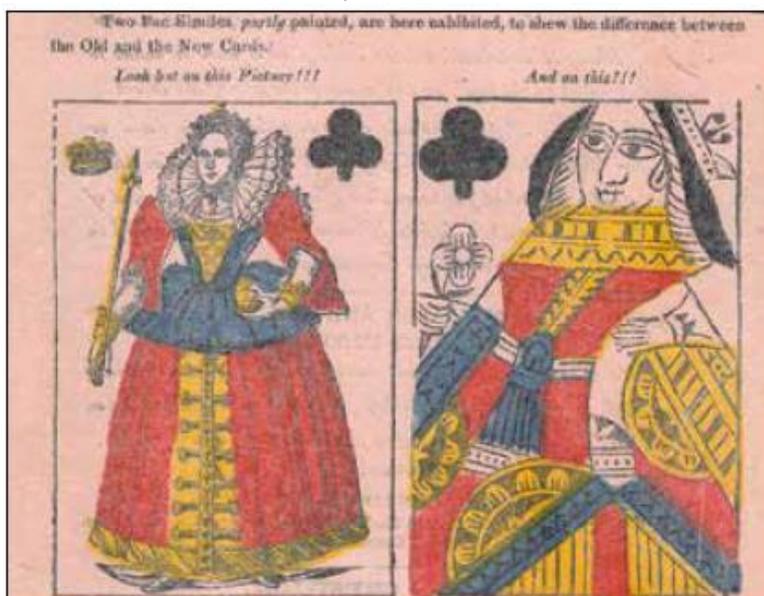
New and Improved: 'Portrait cards'

By the 1700s, portraits on standard court cards had evolved to become highly stylised and no longer particularly realistic. Over the years, various card-makers have seen this as an opportunity to market improvements on the design and to differentiate their cards from the others. A common idea has been to make the figures look more like real people, often with specific and well-known people in mind. There is no conventional name for this kind of card, but I have recently proposed 'portrait cards', which briefly conveys the idea.

The earliest English example we know is by Rowley, who registered an Ace of Spades at the Tax Office in 1765. These cards were engraved (while all the other makers were printing with wooden blocks) and the quality of their appearance is a great improvement over the best standard cards of the time. Rowley also changed the suit signs and colours, using: pikes in black, red cups, orange diamonds and green cloverleaves. For their age, these are not as rare now as one might expect. It is fair to guess that they were quite popular, which is unusual given their novelty, but they would also survive more than the standard sets if they were kept as an attractive item to own, rather than worn out in use.



*Queen of Diamonds and King of Cups.
Cards by Rowley, c 1765.*



*Creswick's Imperial Playing Cards 1820-23.
Detail from advertisement.*

The next example comes from 1820, when Thomas Creswick produced a set of 'Imperial' playing cards. Creswick was a paper maker as well as a card maker, and the cards were advertised as being superior in card quality as well as having a new appearance. The advertisement is shown below, commanding us to 'look but on this card!!! ... and on this!!!'. The court figures are said to portray real monarchs and the designs do look impressive, as claimed. The advertisement shows a direct comparison between the new Queen of Clubs and the traditional version.



De La Rue's first two designs: a more elaborate design (left) and one more traditional (right).

The creation of these various alternative sets in the space of ten years coincides with reductions in tax and a growing popularity of informal card games. The new popularity of games among family and friends almost certainly accounts for the uptake of these new designs.

From the 1850's, with more industrial production and with big increases in annual volumes sold, the card makers could start making different kinds of cards to appeal to different buyers. One impressive set is the "International" playing card pack made by De La Rue in 1874 and marking the Wedding of Queen

Victoria's second son Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, and Grand Duchess Marie Alexandrovina, daughter of Alexander II. The court cards depict members of the (often related) European Royal Families. The illustrations are from a 2003 reproduction by John Berry.

With non-standard cards more accepted, packs have been made featuring Kings and Queens from Tudor times, the Court of Louis XV, Shakespearean characters, politicians of different countries, famous actors and so on. The portrait style is now familiar everywhere card games are played. We saw German examples by Dondorf in the previous article in this series, and below we show some by Grimaud from France.

This style is appreciated by many players and of course by collectors.



International Playing Cards by De La Rue, 1874. Queen Victoria and the Crown Prince of Prussia.



International Playing Cards by De La Rue, 1874. Queen Victoria and the Crown Prince of Prussia.

Paul Bostock, June 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