

Card Design: Experiments with Indices

The Index

A playing-cards ‘index’ is the combination of a suit sign and a printed number or letter showing the card’s value. These indices (plural of index) are most often placed in the top left and bottom right corners but they are sometimes printed in all four corners. This invention meant that players could review their cards merely by fanning them slightly (the four corner versions can be fanned by players holding the cards left-handed as well as right-handed.)

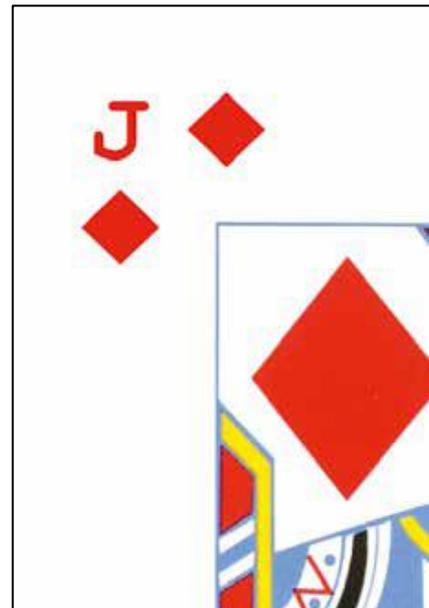
We take these markings so much for granted today, and they are so useful, that it is surprising that they are a fairly late addition to the standard pack. From their origins in the late 14th century until 1864, cards had no corner markings.

American Invention

The index is the first of two American inventions that changed playing-cards, the other being the Joker. We are confident of the date for this particular innovation, because Cyrus D Saladee of Washington DC registered a patent and from 1864 the firm of Samuel Hart began printing the first cards with index markings.

Card players are highly resistant to change, but corner indices were quickly adopted in most countries. There are some games in which players don’t hold a hand of cards – like Faro – and for these games players preferred traditional cards until they became obsolete around 40 years later.

The cards that Samuel Hart and Co. manufactured under Saladee’s patent had indices with three markings – a number or letter in the corner with suit signs to the right and below (for the top left corner). I do not have an example personally, but the indices looked like the illustration here.



So, given the obvious usefulness and popularity of this new idea on the one hand, and the patent on the other, how did other card manufacturers manage to compete? The answer is that we see a period of great inventiveness leading to some new designs.

Examples

The examples below show some of the various innovations that the English playing-card makers adopted so that they could use indices but also claim that they were not copies. Personally I doubt that the patent design would have stood up to a court hearing, simply because throughout the entire history of playingcards, makers have copied the best of the available designs.

All three of these cards date from the 1880s.

The first Jack of Diamonds on the left is by Willis and it is called a 'Triplicate'. As you can see, a full Jack is reproduced in both corners. Dougherty had produced a similar design in the US. The designs are rather cluttered, and players would have to make a wide fan to see the pictures in the corner. These were not a great success, so they are relatively rare and more expensive to acquire now than the more conventional designs.

The middle card is by Woolley & Co and was named 'Eureka'. The card on the right is by De La Rue and was called 'Dexter'. In both cases a very clear and economical design has been created without having an extra border. However, with the cards named inside the suit signs, once again you would have to fan the cards out widely to see these letterings.



The card index may seem humble, but it liberated the design of the playing card faces. Nowadays we have souvenir cards where the faces can be 52 artworks, 52 football players, 52 flags of the world... and these can all be played with if they have indices added in their corners.

Lastly, in terms of style, bridge players tend to be happy with regular, highly readable indices that avoid any ambiguity, while poker players prefer small narrow indices so that they can peek at the corners of their two cards from the dealer without revealing anything to their opponents.

Paul Bostock, March 2017

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