

Card Design: Illustrated Playing Cards

Illustrated playing cards are absolutely useless for playing bridge – or any other card game! In ‘illustrated’ or ‘pictorial’ packs, the standard card faces are replaced with drawings and text. A common format is for the cards to be used like a story-board with illustrations and text telling the reader all about a specific historical event. Well known examples cover topics like The Spanish Armada, The Popish Plot, The South Sea Bubble, Marlborough’s Victories and the reigns of King James II and Queen Anne. These cards were particularly popular from around 1680 until 1760 or so.



Illustrated cards from c. 1679 showing The Spanish Armada of 1588.

Once this idea had gained popularity, many variations followed. There are satirical packs, entertaining packs, educational packs (covering numeracy, literacy, astronomy) and geographical packs. The Geographical packs – showing, for example, the Counties of England and Wales, are quite early examples of printed maps and as such they can reach tens of thousands of pounds at auction.

Many of these packs have survived intact and in this respect they fare much better than standard cards. At this time, cards were very expensive, so a standard pack would have been bought to use, almost certainly, for gambling. The standard backs were plain (usually the ivory colour of the card used) and as soon as one card had gained a distinctive scuff or mark, the cards would have to be thrown away for any serious play or gambling. The illustrated packs were designed to be looked at, shared with friends and then they would be kept – after all they were expensive.

Many examples have survived even from the seventeenth century. The British Museum has a collection inherited from a Victorian expert, Lady Charlotte Schreiber. The Worshipful Company of Makers of Playing Cards has an excellent range of these too, given by another prominent Victorian, a former Master of the Company, H D Phillips. The illustrations in this article come from packs in the WCMPC Collection.



A pack of 'Pastime Cards' probably published by Lenthall c. 1715.

The Pastime Cards, illustrated, are typical in that they have a carefully engraved picture with an accompanying text and they are educational but with a light touch. The publisher, Lenthall, acquired the rights for a number of illustrated packs and was their main producer in the later years of their popularity.

Some of these cards are particularly appealing, and my own preference is for a pack that leaves behind the weighty events of the day and looks at the people on London's streets. The oarsman is offering transport to Vauxhall Gardens, a grand evening venue at the time, and the seller of the Evening Post has a job that we are still familiar with today. ■



John Kirk, Cries and Humours of London, 1750s.

Paul Bostock, June 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