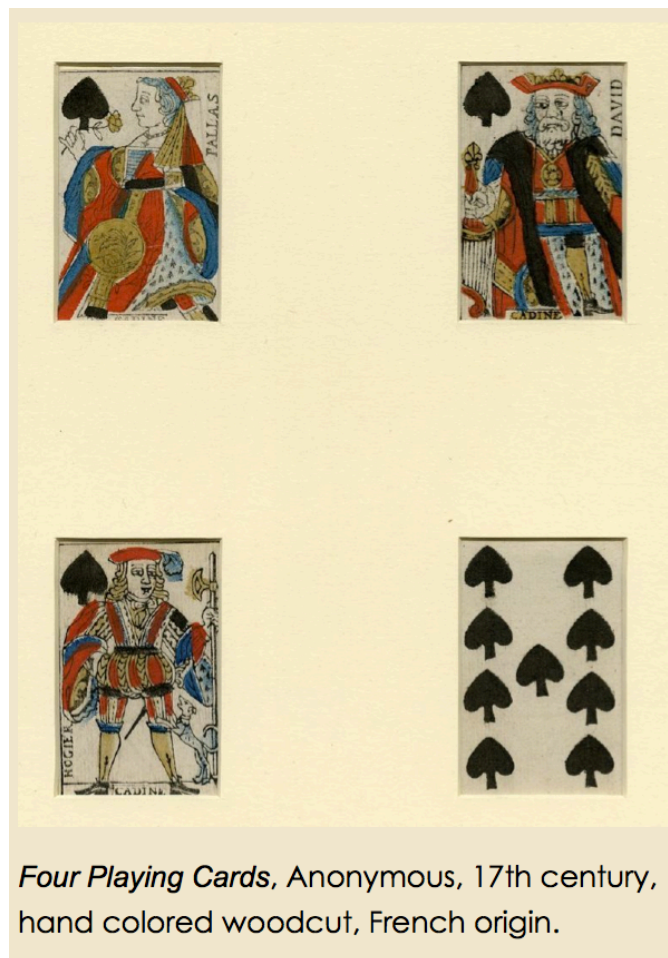


Iconography of Playing Cards

Erica Hawley



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Traditionally, playing cards are rectangular pieces of paper used to form a flat plane, which depicts an image of a worth. The values are delineated by either a figural, or face, symbol or a numerical value. In the set of four playing cards from the seventeenth century Europe, there are three face cards and one numerical card; these cards are hand-colored woodcuts by an unknown artist. The purpose for these cards is charged by the images that appear on them; who appears on them and why is a question worth exploring. The cards themselves generate a clear form of leisure and sociability; therefore, it is the question of where this recreational activity connects to French culture and how the design and iconography supports said culture.

Playing cards stand as concrete evidence for a shared culture of both common people and the elite.¹ The origins of European playing cards are still unknown, but they most likely came to Europe from the East; there is early evidence in both China and India.² Cards first appeared in Italy and spread rapidly following their introduction.

The earliest playing cards were hand-painted and due to the labor intensity they required, they were very expensive. For this reason it is known that the earliest playing cards were thought to have been only in the realm of the of the wealthy.³ As

¹ Smoller, Laura A. *Playing Cards and Popular Culture in Sixteenth Century Nuremberg*. (Kirksville: The Sixteenth Century Journal, 1986) p. 183

² L. Smoller (1986) p. 185

³ L. Smoller (1986) p. 185

the popularity of leisure games for entertainment grew, new developments in production arrived. These new techniques of woodcut were significant because they allowed the card maker to print the entire deck at once on one sheet; the expedited process brought stencils that could be filled with color in a more time efficient manner.⁴

In different countries and territories playing cards differed between how many suits and ranks a deck of cards would have. In the fifteenth century, the French generally used king, queen and knave, which is more commonly known today as the Jack. Playing cards became so prevalent by the sixteenth century that they were used for educationally for teaching lessons of propaganda or often to portray a belief of the region to be instilled upon the card users.⁵ For example, in the second year of the new French Republic, Saint Simon created a more complex system of playing-card propaganda and he replaced royalty on the face cards with commoners and 'sans-culottes', who symbolized liberty and equality for all races and classes. This propaganda strategy supports the idea that cards – although considered a lower art – were used in a deliberate manner to get a political point across to the masses. In earlier French times, playing cards were also used as a form of education with strong undertones of political stances and biases. For example, a six-year old Louis XIV had a strict education that was tightly conformed to develop political concepts for him, guided by his guardian, Cardinal Mazarin.⁶

⁴ Wynne, Marjorie G. *The Art of the Playing Card*. (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1973) p. 152

⁵ M. Wynne (1973) p. 160

⁶ M. Wynne (1973) p. 160

An in-depth compositional analysis will identify the individual features for each of the four cards. The cards are arranged in a matted format for display; the Queen is in the upper left corner, the King is in the upper right corner, the Jack is in the bottom left, and the Nine of Spades is in the bottom right. The cards palette as a whole consists of four colors; the colors are black, yellow ochre, red, and blue all set against the white background of the paper. The Queen is dressed in a luxurious robe of the three primary colors with details of gold fleur-de-lis against a lighter valued blue. She is shown in profile holding a gold flower and is adorned in a decorated necklace. There is also a gold coin-like object overlaid her figure, which is seemingly unattached to her, but still has a presence. The coin has a type of small plant, as well as the number twenty-four. At the upper right corner, the word "Pallas" is spelled beside the Queen's head and there is also the word "Cadine" at the center base of the card. The King is also dressed lavish attire; a majority red robe, with blue and gold details, as well as a black cloak over his shoulders. He is wearing a crown of red and gold. His chest is decorated with a gold flower within a circle and he is also holding a staff with a fleur-de-lis at the top. A gold harp is at the left of him,⁷ right below the staff. Again the word "Cadine" is at the center base of the card, as well at the word "David" at the upper right corner of the card. The word "Cadine" was the inscribed name of the maker. ⁸The Jack is shown in a wide leg stance, toes pointed outwards in an extremely two-dimensional way. He is dressed in the four colors, but his garments have pattern all over and are more fitted and detailed. He is wearing what

⁷ Kavanagh, Thomas M. *Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005)

⁸ M. Wynne. (1973) p. 166

appears to be a red beret on his head. He, too, is holding a staff; however, this staff has a half-circular blade called a halberd. There is also a dog at the right side of him, jumping up towards him. The word “Cadine” is present again at the center base, as well as the word “Hogier” at the bottom left side of the card.

Iconography is the most significant element of the invention of playing cards. The symbols used are the numbers one through 9 and for the face cards in ascending order of power – king, queen, and knave. The aforementioned symbols included in the anonymous playing cards are purposefully placed in the composition of the face cards. French iconography within face cards having deeper, more intelligent meanings was very common. For example, leaves portrayed peasant life, bells symbolized activities of fools, hearts portrayed aristocratic burghers, and acorns represented the activities of two swine. The details included in the cards like the fleur-de-lis represent a clear French background. An interesting addition that came with the popularity of face cards was the inclusion of subjects on the face cards other than the elite. The purpose for this expansion was to make the community of cards more accessible to the public. The cards included common people, not quite destitute, but wealthy enough and dressed well to represent certain families.

In more contemporary times in France, a cataloging code was created in 1791. It was the first national cataloging code; the form it took was playing cards. The playing cards served as code to provide information about the context of the

government during the confiscation of the church.⁹ The code came with guidelines on how to describe publications in order to label and place them accurately in an orderly system. It was a way for French government to issue order among inventory of its property.¹⁰ This aided the French in eventually reaching their goal of providing the French with a Constitution.¹¹

The playing cards served as recreational activity, as well as connected citizens to French culture and maintained an informed people. In the years following the French Revolution, revolutionary leaders were determined to ruin every bit of the monarchy and they did so by tarnishing the public images of the royals on playing cards. In some decks of playing cards found, royal iconography such as the fleurs-de-lis and crowns were either removed entirely or substituted the crowns with berets.¹² In 1793, a more intricate system was devised for playing-card propaganda by dismissing royal figures on the face cards and introducing 'sans-culottes', or commoners.¹³

An activity that was once of leisure for the elite turned into a tactic of propaganda and brought forth political and social climates to the forefront of their rightful societies.

⁹ Hopkins, Judith. *The 1791 French Cataloging Code and the Origins of the Card Catalog*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992) p. 378

¹⁰ J. Hopkins (1992) p. 378

¹¹ J. Hopkins (1992) p. 379

¹² M. Wynne (1973) p. 166

¹³ M. Wynne (1973) p. 167

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