

Genii Session

By Roberto Giobbi

A Brief Updated History of Playing Cards

When I published the German version of *Card College Volume 1* in 1992, I included a short essay on the history of playing cards. In later editions I expanded on it and made a few corrections, among other smaller things I had committed a bigger mistake, namely that of assuming that today's playing cards originated from tarot cards. The truth, as so often, is exactly the opposite, because playing cards were already in use in Europe in the second half of the 14th century whereas the game of Tarocchi and with it the Tarot cards was only invented in the first part of the 15th century in Italy. These mistakes were corrected in later editions of *Card College* and I'm therefore publishing this updated version of my essay for the benefit of all those who have the first few editions (we now have about 19,000 copies of *Card College Volume 1* in the market). At the end of the essay I have also added a small annotated bibliography for all who would like to obtain more information about playing cards, their history, use, symbolism etc., a most fascinating subject.

Rather than calling playing cards a prop, as it is often done in the literature, I would like to consider them to be an instrument of the card conjurer, like the piano or the violin is an instrument to a musician, and I would even dare saying that cards are the most important and most widely used instrument in all of conjuring. The more you know about your instrument, the more sensitively you will handle it and the more expressively you will master it, making it an extension of your personality. It is therefore imperative that you learn some facts (and speculations) regarding the origins and symbolism of playing cards. In addition, the material presented here can form the basis for both intelligent conversations with your spectators as well as presentations for card routines.

There are as many theories about the origins of playing cards and their introduction into Europe as there are about the origins of the Easter bunny. A plausible thesis maintains that Arabs brought cards from the Middle East in the 14th century and introduced them to Europe via Spain and Italy. Egypt is often cited as the country of their origin, and Egyptian playing cards do bear a remarkable resemblance to the earliest Spanish and Italian decks. The oft-heard claim that gypsies were responsible for their introduction is not supported by the fact that cards were present in Europe before gypsies.

In the *Journal of the International Playing Card Society* of February 1989, Luis Monreal tells us in his article "Iconographia de la Baraja Española" that the first known mention of playing cards occurred in Spain in 1371. We know of no earlier reference, and their absence is telling in the works of both Petrarch and Boccaccio. In Italy, a Florentine city ordinance forbidding a newly introduced card game called "Naibbe" is dated May 23, 1376. Cards are not mentioned in England until the 15th century, but seem to have first appeared in central and southern Europe at the end of the 14th century, lending support to the theory that they were imported, though their exact geographical origins remain obscure.

The expertise of artisans and the ingenuity of the human spirit are wedded in the mysterious deck of cards, making it not merely a mathematical labyrinth and chaos of symbols, but—in the skillful hands of a card magician—a proper stage on which 52 actors can be brought to life to represent the entire human condition. There are, in fact, incredible parallels between the world of man and the microcosm of the deck. The duality principle of life is symbolized by the colors red and black—day and night, good and evil, etc. The court and spot cards represent the hierarchy underlying the organization of primitive and civilized societies. The four suits symbolize the four

seasons, the 13 cards in each suit represent the 13 lunar cycles each year, the 12 court cards correspond to the 12 months of the Gregorian calendar (1582), the 52 cards are the 52 weeks in the year, the sum of all the pips equals 365 (364 plus one for the Joker, and a second Joker for leap years!), the number of days in the year. It is particularly curious that, if you spell out the names of all 13 values, from Ace to King, dealing one card for each letter, the final card of the deck will be dealt on the "g" of King. More astonishing still, this works even if you are spelling the words in French, Swedish, Dutch, or German (in *Card College Volume 5*, pp.1253, you will find a piece called "The History of Playing Cards" that uses this idea as the plot for what I think is an interesting effect). There is no evidence that the inventors of cards intended these characteristics, though the Alsatian master Ingold explained in his *Das guldien spiel* that the 52 cards represented the 52 weeks of the year and the four suits corresponded to the four sins of humanity. Thus began a compelling myth, which should not be construed as an accurate analysis of the original allegorical meaning of cards.

In 14th century Spain, the four suits represented the four dominant principles of the prevailing society. Diamonds (*oro* = gold, money) stood for capital, Hearts (*copas* = cups, goblets) for the church, Spades (*spadas* = swords) for nobility and Clubs (*baston* = clubs) for political power. The French followed this pattern closely, calling the suits *carreau* (Diamonds), *coeur* (Hearts), *pique* (Spades), and *trèfle* (Clubs).

According to a treatise by Johannes von Rheinfelden, a German Dominican priest, the 14th century deck already consisted of 52 cards, divided into four suits of 13 cards, just as we have today. Shortly after, a new game, Tarocchi, was introduced in Italy using an expanded deck. One card was added to each suit, along with 22 additional cards, the *Trionfi*. These cards were used for gambling and still serve that purpose today in certain parts of the world. It is not hard to see that this is the famous Tarot deck, which French occultists first used for fortune-telling at the end of the 18th century. Only later were the Tarot cards—previously used only for play—introduced into countries with no gambling tradition, likely creating the myth that Tarot cards were created for fortune-telling. Decks with less than 52 cards are convenient for some games (piquet, skat, jass, etc.) but are basically incomplete.

Numerous edicts prohibited playing with cards on both economic and religious grounds. From the beginning they have been the objects of play, which in one form or another involved money as the winner's reward. Those gamblers who wanted to increase their chances of winning likely developed the first trick techniques with cards. The earliest known reference is dated 1408 in Paris and describes a card cheat who took advantage of his contemporaries with a game bearing a psychological resemblance to Three Card Monte.

The first card tricks were likely created by people who enjoyed performing. The earliest known description of a card trick also dates back to the 15th century. In his book *De Viribus Quantitatis* (ca.1493) Luca Pacioli, the father of modern accounting, describes a performance in which Giovanni de Jasonne de Ferrara divined a chosen card. Although the method is not explained in detail, the text says that a boy is blindfolded, a card is then selected by a spectator and the performer lets the boy know by means of words, gestures, coughing, and the position of the feet the identity of the chosen card. This historic tidbit, recently discovered by Vanni Bossi, appears in an unpublished manuscript co-authored by Leonardo da Vinci, and is also the first known mention of "Second Sight."

The first card effect to be described *and* explained in print appears in 1550 in Girolamo Cardano's *De subtilitate*. This effect was the location and identification of a selected card. Three methods are mentioned: the break (page 28), the key-card principle (Chapter 10) and a reference, bereft of detail, to mathematical methods. In a later, expanded edition of this work, Cardano added an anecdote describing the wonderful card effects of

Francesco Soma, a Neapolitan lute player. Dalmau, a Spanish magician of this period, was renowned for having performed card tricks in Milan for Emperor Charles V.

Although the 16th century saw numerous descriptions and explanations of card tricks, the first detailed exposition was in Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1584. In 1593 Horatio Galasso published *Giochi di carte bellissimi di regola, e di memoria* in Venice. Rather than describe tricks dependent on sleight-of-hand, as Scot had, Galasso described tricks having as their basis intelligent applications of mathematical principles, including a stacked deck, possibly the first description of this principle. Scot and Galasso thus laid the foundations on which card conjuring would build during the following two centuries.

Any brief sketch of the history of card conjuring would have to make mention of the following individuals, who profoundly influenced all who followed them: Pinetti of Italy, Robert-Houdin of France, Johann Hofzinsler of Austria, Charles Bertram of England, and S.W. Erdnase of the United States. The latter wrote the first detailed and precise descriptions of card-cheating methods. His book, *The Expert at the Card Table* (1902) was at first only understood by a few, chief among them Dai Vernon, who must be cited as the last truly outstanding influence on the art. In the first half of the 20th century many important contributions were made by performers and authors such as Carlo Rossetti, Padre Wenceslao Ciurò, Theodore Annemann, Frederick Braue, Jean Hugard, John Northern Hilliard, Professor Hoffmann (Angelo Lewis), August Roterberg, Ottokar Fischer, Conradi-Horster (Conrad A. Horster), Camille Gaultier, and Jules Dhotel. More recently the art and literature of card conjuring have been enriched by Arturo de Ascanio, Derek Dingle, Alex Elmsley, Lewis Ganson, Frank Garcia, Phil Goldstein, Bro. John Hamman, Richard Kaufman, Harry Lorayne, Edward Marlo, Stephen Minch, Juan Tamariz, and Roy Walton, to name just a few.

Without doubt, playing cards are the most fascinating object employed in the art of magic. No less a performer than Hofzinsler designated card conjuring the "poetry" of magic. Cards have produced a palette of sciences, from their symbolism of humanity to their numerical properties and all the mathematical possibilities embodied therein. They serve at play and strategy, for fortune-telling and occult practices, and as a vehicle for social communication. They permit an expression of skill and intelligence. Everything is brought together in card conjuring, for there is no effect, no emotion, that can't be expressed with a deck of cards. They are a microcosm reflecting the "human condition," to use Rousseau's expression, mirroring the fate and reality of mankind. Card tricks unite the principles of nature (natural material), of art (creativity, interpretations, self expression, talent), of science (psychological and mathematical principles) and of spirituality (symbolism, personal growth, therapy).

Thousands of human beings have influenced the history of card magic in small and large steps, and hundreds of thousands of magazines and books testify persuasively to this. At the beginning of the 21st century, at least one book on card magic is published each week. Perhaps reading this essay will start you on the royal road to card magic and help you become a part of that history. (Editor's note: Reading *Card College* and other marvelous books by Kaufman & Company may help a little).

I would like to thank my learned friends Vanni Bossi, William Kalush, and Richard Vollmer for contributing information that has substantially influenced this essay and, of course, I thank my friend and publisher Stephen Minch for editing the original text from *Card College* and agreeing to allow it to be published in *Genii* in this revised and updated form.

Further Reading

The first three titles are on the general history of magic. In my opinion a fair understanding of the major developments in magic as well as knowledge of its main

performers, inventors, and authors will place into context the use and importance of playing cards as the conjurer's instrument.

* Christopher and Maurine, Milbourne, *The Illustrated History of Magic*, Heinemann, USA, 1996. This is an updated version of the original 1973 edition and is in my opinion the best book for those who would like to get a rough idea of the origins and history of magic. It is a light and entertaining read with lots of illustrations, reproductions of playbills/posters, and photographs. If this is still too much for you, get Milbourne Christopher's *Panorama of Magic* in its Dover paperback edition—this is the essential history with more illustrations and photographs than text at a very affordable price.

* Clarke, Sidney W., *The Annals of Conjuring*, The Miracle Factory, Seattle 2001. Experts concur that this is the most complete of all books on the history of magic to date and within its 600 plus pages you will find answers to most of your questions about the history of our craft.

The following titles are on the history of playing cards:

* D'Allemagne, René, *Les cartes à jouer du XIVe au XXe siècle*, Paris, 1906. Two huge volumes on the fascinating history of playing cards, beautifully illustrated. This is the best I've ever come across on this subject, but is hard to find, expensive, and written in French.

* Benham, W. Gurney, *Playing Cards—The History And Secrets of the Pack*, Spring Books, London (n.d.).

* Hargrave, Catherine Perry, *A History of Playing Cards And a Bibliography of Cards And Gaming*, Dover Publications; New York 1966 (unabridged reprint originally published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1930).

* Morley, H.T., *Old And Curious Playing Cards*, The Wellfleet Press, New Jersey, 1989.

* Taylor, S. *The History of Playing Cards—With Anecdotes of Their Use in Conjuring, Fortune-Telling and Card-Sharping*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, 1973 (reprint of the first edition of 1865 by John Camden Hotten, London).

* And last but not least there is the internet. You might want to try the homepage of the International Playing Card Society (<http://i-p-c-s.org/history.html>) and then go from here following whatever links your time allows. This link here takes you directly to a most extensive bibliography of books on playing cards: <http://www.cs.man.ac.uk/~daf/i-p-c-s.org/faq/books.php>.