

## PLAYING CARD COLLECTORS ART COLLECTORS EXTRAORDINAIRE

By Rod Starling

It is always interesting when one field of collectables crosses with another and the field of playing cards is no exception. Playing card graphics appear on many such collectables as plates, cups, saucers, mugs, steins and clothing, just to name a few.

Sometimes playing cards may be featured in works of art; in fact, some of the very old master paintings that have included cards in their subject provide a clue as to the time frame in which French suited cards were known to exist. For example, the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C. has a painting called "The Card Players" painted c.1525 by Lucas Van Leyden. The scene depicts a group of Dutch card players around a table. It is apparent from the painting that the cards bear French suits, although only the Ace of Spades and the Six of Hearts can be clearly seen.



On the other hand, notable works of art have served as the back design of playing card decks. The early editions of the Congress brand of cards often had back designs taken from notable paintings. That is to say, the back design was substantially copied from some work of art.

As far as card collectors are concerned, the most notable examples of card back designs taken from artwork are the two found on the very rare "Norwood 85" deck, namely *The Storm* and *Amor & Psyche*. I have previously written about the two "Norwood 85" back designs in *Clear the Decks* articles, the last one being published in the June 2006

issue. However, for the sake of completeness, I will reiterate.

In 1880, Pierre Auguste Cot painted *The Storm*. The original painting hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Oddly, and as I have also previously pointed out, *The Storm* that was used on "Norwood 85" is not named on the back design of the cards but it was named when the same design was later used as one of the "Bijou No.1" brand back designs. The other "Norwood 85" back design was taken from a painting by William Bouguereau named *Amor & Psyche* but is not named on the deck. I do not know when the original was painted or where it is today.

Another interesting back design from the card collector's point of view is the Congress deck named *Berenice*. This back design was also taken from a work of art and it was issued in at least four variations that I have found, three of which I picture here. The fourth version can be seen in the 1911 edition of "The Official Rules of Card Games-Hoyle up-to-date" published by the United States Playing Card Company.



The first edition of the back design is in black and white and in a square border. In the lower right corner the name "Falero" appears referring to Luis Ricardo Falero, a Spanish artist who lived from 1851 to 1896. However, I have been unable to find any reference anywhere to a work of his called *Berenice*. I did, however, find a commentary that noted that Falero was famous for his treatment of nudes and that his most famous one against a sky background was called *Diana*. The description for *Diana* could fit *Berenice* but I have not been able to find a copy *Diana* to compare. I do think it possible that *Diana* may actually be what is being called *Berenice* so I shall keep hunting for more information on that issue.

The second edition of the *Berenice* back design is also in black and white but in an oval border. It lacks some of the detail of the first edition, namely, the second nude in the background. The third and most common edition is in color but lacks even

more detail than the other two and, except for a different border design, is the same as the one pictured in the 1911 Rule book. I once actually came across what I thought was a black and white print of this work in a New York City art dealer's shop and, thinking that it was merely a print, inquired as to the price. The dealer informed me that it was in fact an original by Falero and the price was \$12,000.00! That was about 20 years ago and based on that experience, I believe that that the first black and white edition of the deck with the square border is the closest to the original work.

*The United States Playing Card Company* was not alone in using notable art for the back designs of playing cards. I have a deck by The Standard Playing Card Company of Chicago named *Contentment* which pictures a young lady in sepia tone. It has been in my collection for many years and is a further example of the "cross-over" of interests. In this particular case, it correlates to a very fine hand painted vase I possess that bears the same picture in full color.



As you will see from the pictures, I have framed the blank card from the deck and display it a china closet next to the vase. It makes a nice conversation piece especially when I can relate the following story. One day I visited the Vanderbilt Estate in New Hyde Park, New York and there, on a side wall of a roped off room, I spotted the original painting. I called one of the guards and she was able to

go to the picture and inform me that it was signed M. Nonnanbruch but was undated. My subsequent research shows that the painting was done by the German artist, Max Nonnenbruch c.1905. He was born in 1851 and died in 1922.



Getting back to *The Storm* version of "Norwood 85", the painting must have been very popular in its day because I have seen it reproduced on a variety of items including a tapestry, the cover of a note book, as a cameo brooch and years ago I found an excellent reproduction of the painting, in almost full size, hanging in one of the dining rooms of the Black Angus Steak House in Adamstown, Pennsylvania. The original painting, which I have seen, is five feet tall. The copy in the Black Angus appeared to be about four feet tall. I also found (and purchased), a beautiful bisque, full relief wall plaque that was likewise taken from the Cot painting and it too makes an interesting conversation piece.



Perhaps you may look through your card collections and any other collections that you possess with renewed enthusiasm and search for any of those instances where interests cross. It is great fun and usually educational.



Finally, playing cards, particularly the court cards and aces, have been the medium for many fine examples of art and although examples can be found among American decks, some of the earlier European decks, particularly those from France, Germany, Austria and Italy, provide very fine examples indeed. B. Dondorf of Germany produced many decks by the true lithographic process and they are really exceptional.

The engraved, hand-painted costume cards produced in France are quite simply magnificent little works of art. The December 2006 edition of CTD carried a nice article about the French Costume cards and included scans from four different decks. Unfortunately, the black and white copies do not do justice to the originals but do at least give an idea of what they look like. A much better idea of the beauty of these cards can be obtained from the colored pictures on the 52 Plus Joker website ([www.52plusjoker.org](http://www.52plusjoker.org)). The originals of such decks are truly museum pieces.

A deck made in Italy by Modiano, c.1895 for the Austrian Lloyd steamship line features what I believe are among the most gorgeous court cards ever made for commercial purposes. There are many other beautiful examples that I am sure some member collectors possess.



*Editor's Note; Rod has found an area of collecting that we don't even have an example of. On the odd occasion we have seen a card back design on an item of china but nothing as appealing as Rod's. Thanks once again Rod for all your articles, each one is new and different – and very interesting!*