

FIFTEENTH-CENTURY PLAYING CARDS

By Lady Marissa von Atzinger

INTRODUCTION

This set of fifty-two playing cards has a design based on the only known full set of fifteenth-century illuminated playing cards. The original “Cloisters” cards (South Netherlandish, ca. 1475) can be viewed on a rotating basis at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They were designed with four suits that represent hunting equipment: red dog collars, red hunting horns, blue hound tethers, and blue gaming nooses. Each suit is represented by pip cards with values from one to ten, plus a set of royal cards including a King, a Queen, and a Valet for each suit. The original set of cards has minor wear and was most likely a collector’s item instead of being used for actual play.

The artist is beginning to practice period painting and illumination, and this project has served as a great opportunity to gain experience with freehand design and painting techniques. The artist was able to practice drawing and paint application methods and have hours of practice on human figure work and clothing. As her skills improve, the artist will begin adding her own designs to future projects.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Freehand designs were drawn in pencil, outlined in black ink, and colored with gouache.
- Original set of cards were probably not used for play, but kept as collectors’ items.
- Artist intentionally reproduced the cards to practice techniques, and even reproduced a mistake made in period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The original set of Cloisters playing cards were created using pasteboard as a base. Pen and ink, tempera, and applied gold and silver (seemingly paint) were used to create the original images. Each card measures approximately 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches by 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (12 x 7 centimeters).¹ As described by the accompanying information on the Met Museum website, the images “were drawn with a bold, free, and engaging, if somewhat unrefined, hand.”²

The original cards were painted with tempera, which would have involved a variety of pigments being mixed with egg as a binding agent. However, many pigments contained materials that would be considered toxic (ex. cadmium colors or those with lead). Many of the ochres and those made with semi-precious materials like malachite and lapis lazuli would have been safer. It also appears that the gold was applied using ground pigments as paint instead of gold leaf.

Since the artist used this project for practice, modern materials were used for the reproduction cards. However, the artist attempted to use period methods by drawing all images freehand and using a simple paint palette. Bristol Smooth paper was selected to provide a sturdy card base similar to that of pasteboard. For the pip cards, the artist hand-drew one image and used it as a stencil to outline the locations for each repeated suit symbol. The artist then used a dip pen with a crow quill nib and waterproof black ink to hand-draw the details inside of the stencil outlines.

After allowing a day for the ink to set, the artist erased all pencil lines and used the following colors of gouache to decorate the images: Titanium White, Ivory Black, Phthalocyanine Blue, Cadmium Red, and Cadmium Yellow Light. Secondary colors were mixed by the artist. Antique Gold Brush ‘n Leaf paint was used on the reproduction cards.

¹ "Set of Fifty-Two Playing Cards [South Netherlandish (Burgundian Territories)]" September 2009

² "Set of Fifty-Two Playing Cards" Accessed October 2013

PROGRESSION OF A PIP CARD:



Figure 1: Pip progression photos by Lady Marissa von Atzinger

These progression images demonstrate how the pip cards were created by the artist. Each suit was traced using a hand-drawn stencil (which were used in period), and then black ink was applied with a dip pen using a crow quill nib. Gouache was applied to add color, and gold paint was applied as needed. Each card has been outlined in red and blue as depicted in the original Cloisters set, with red suits having red on the inside line and blue suits having blue on the inside line. All royal cards were created with blue on the inside line. Note that one card was

purposefully reproduced with a flaw that appeared in the original card set. The ten of horns is a red suit that had the outlines drawn with blue, instead of red, on the inside line. The artist decided to include the flaw to highlight the fact that period artists did make mistakes. The back of each card has been left blank, per the original design.

All figure cards (Kings, Queens, and Valets) were drawn freehand while studying the original set. They were drawn first in pencil, and then outlined with black ink. After allowing the ink to dry, gouache and gold paint were applied.

The artist did not take drastic creative liberties with this project since it is their first entry in an Arts & Sciences Faire. The project served as a chance to practice freehand ink drawing and proper paint application techniques. In addition, creating the royal cards provided a great opportunity to practice figure and clothing work.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLAYING CARDS

Playing cards likely originated in China prior to or in the twelfth century before spreading to Europe in the thirteenth century.³ Early playing cards in France were what we today call tarot cards, and were present in the area prior to 1350.⁴ In the early fifteenth century, the typical four suit cards began to appear in France, and eventually the court cards of mainly kings and knights evolved to include kings, queens, and knaves. Early card designs varied, and a pack would “contain one each of several categories linked by a chosen theme, typically hunting...”⁵ The inclusion of hunting-related images like those in the Cloisters cards appeared in many manifestations, including German examples circa 1440 “with dogs, stags, ducks, and falcons for

³ Catherine Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966), p. 6

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 31

⁵ David Parlett, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 42

suit signs.”⁶ The French-designed symbols of hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades did not first appear until about 1480.⁷

Early playing cards were hand-painted and designed on an individual basis. Producing them was costly and time-consuming, making them available to a limited market.⁸ Many fifteenth-century cards have survived, probably “because they were acquired and preserved as works of art or collectors’ items rather than as playthings.”⁹ Eventually, designs were printed using woodblocks and could be produced en masse. The Cloisters cards used as the basis for this project were individually designed and painted. Their state of preservation hints that they were rarely used and they serve as an example of possible collectors’ items.¹⁰

The Cloisters set of fifteenth-century playing cards are thought to be of South Netherlandish origin and “the royal figures are dressed in elaborate costumes fashionable at the courts of the Burgundian dukes in the second and third quarters of the fifteenth century.”¹¹ According to the Met Museum website, the original designs “are related to a master who came from the south Lowlands, possibly Bruges, but traveled to England and worked with the London printer William Caxton.”¹² The name of the original artist is unknown.

⁶ Catherine Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966), p. 89

⁷ David Parlett, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 43

⁸ Ibid, p. 37

⁹ Ibid, p. 38

¹⁰ “Set of Fifty-Two Playing Cards [South Netherlandish (Burgundian Territories)]” September 2009

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

SOURCES

Hargrave, Catherine. *A History of Playing Cards*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1966.

Parlett, David. *The Oxford Guide to Card Games*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

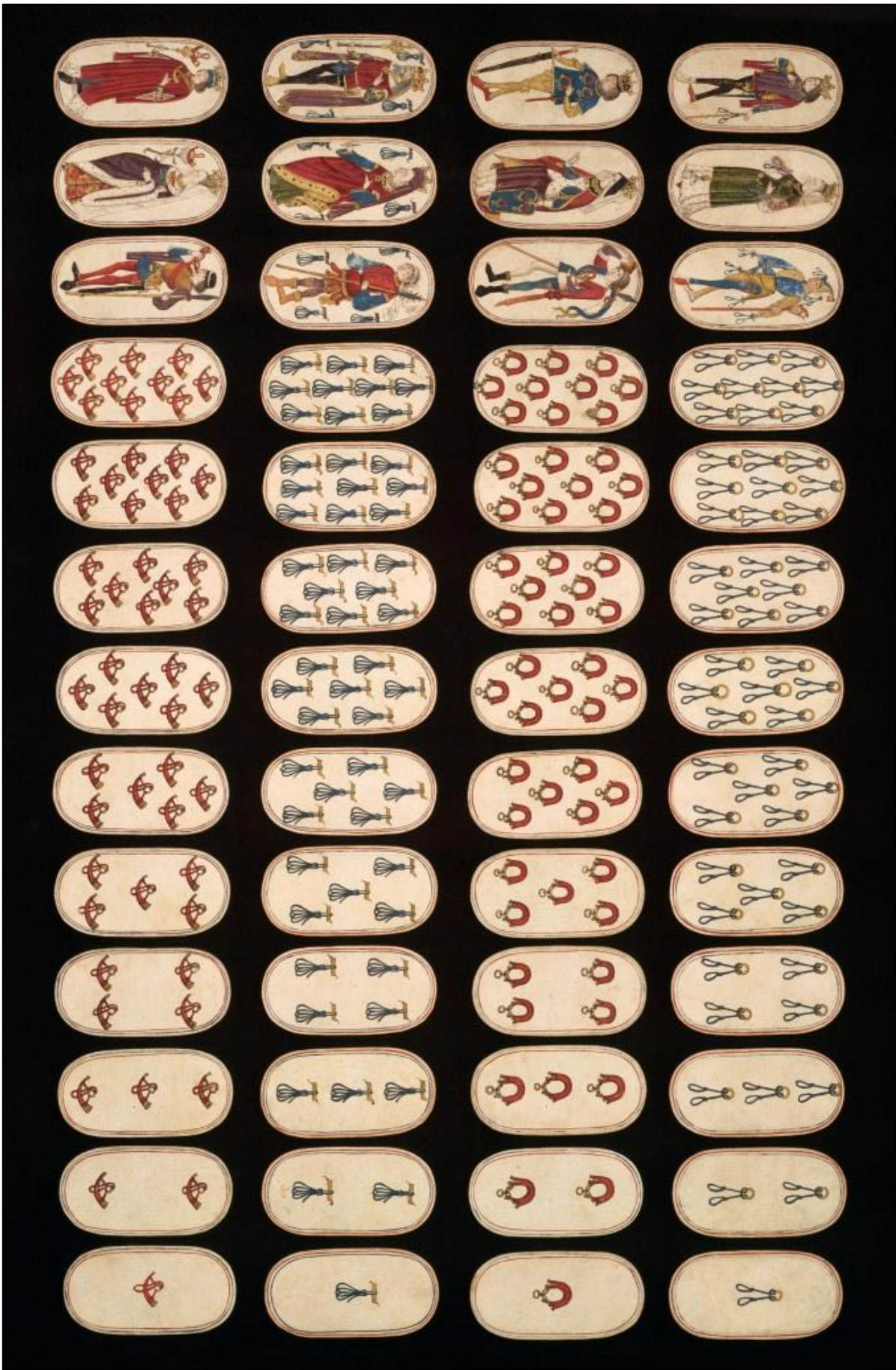
“Set of Fifty-Two Playing Cards” (1983.515.1-52) New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed October 28, 2013 <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/475513?rpp=20&pg=1&ao=on&ft=playing+cards&pos=2>.

"Set of Fifty-Two Playing Cards [South Netherlandish (Burgundian Territories)]" (1983.515.1-52) In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed October 28, 2013, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1983.515.1-52>. (September 2009)

ARTIST

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APPENDIX ON FOLLOWING PAGES



Appendix Image 1: Cloisters playing cards (ca. 1475) <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/475513?rpp=20&pg=1&ao=on&ft=playing+cards&pos=2>



Appendix Image 2: Knave of tethers (ca. 1475) <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/475541>



Appendix Image 3: Five of hunting horns (ca. 1475) <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/475534?rpp=30&pg=1&ft=playing+card+south+netherlandish&pos=6>