

PLAYING CARDS

TOPIC

ROOM 6: IMAGE OF THE TOWN, PRINTING - 16TH C.

Card player: A playing profession?

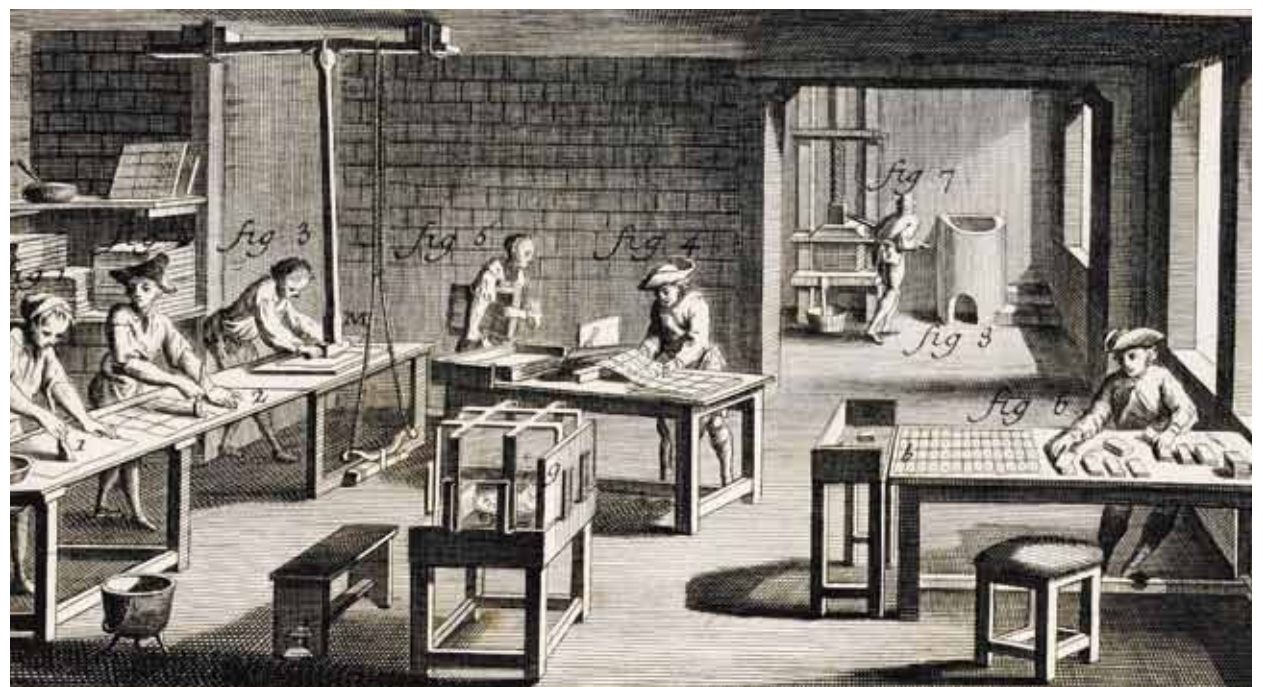
Card manufacturers of Lyons

Card games appeared at the end of the Middle Ages. Originating from the Far-East, they spread all over Europe via the commercial spice and silk routes. The first known card manufacturer in Lyons was James Duboys in 1444. In the 16th c., Lyons, together with Rouen, was the major centre for exporting French card games, mainly to Italy, Spain and Flanders. During the royal visit of 1548, 172 Lyons card manufacturers acclaimed Henri II. Their highly prosperous trade generated a revenue of 200 000 ecus per year in the late 16th c. Their numbers fell drastically in the 17th c. due to a demographic and economic recession, only to increase once again on a regular basis during the 18th c.

Profession: “tailleur d’histoires”

In the mid 16th c., the producers of cards, also known in French as “*tailleurs d’histoires*”, “*tailleurs de molles de cartes*” or “*fayseurs de cartes à jouer*” definitely adopted the name of “*cartiers*” meaning card manufacturers. This was a time when the profession took on a specialist approach: the advance of metal engraving in printing obliged wooden engravers to focus their attention on playing cards. It was also a time when the profession, which ranked between that of a craftsman and that of an artist, was forming a hierarchy and adopting a regulatory strategy. People became apprentices, then companions and then masters: the latter did not, however, have to produce the masterpiece; since the profession was franchised in Lyons, people had to have been a companion for three years and had to swear allegiance to the statutes of the corporation. Furthermore, in 1612, card manufacturers set up a brotherhood and met in the chapel belonging to the Notre-Dame de Confort Convent. In 1614, 23 master Card manufacturers of Lyons drew up the first statutes of the profession in the town: quality requirements and protection of the intellectual property of the card manufacturer by the obligation to incorporate their trademark on the Jack of Clubs. Other statutes followed over the years (**Inv. 42.336 New Statutes and Regulations for Master Card Manufacturers and Companions of the Town and Community of Lyons**).

The card manufacturer’s workshop, plate taken from the *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers par une société de gens de lettres* (Encyclopaedia or Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Professions by a Society of Men of Letters), Diderot and d’Alembert, 1751-1780, Lyons Municipal Library



Cheating!

The card manufacturers of Lyons flourished as their trade names became famous. An integral part of the heritage of master card manufacturers, they could be sold at a price ranging from 500 to 600 ecus. Their fame was such that any counterfeiting of the cards and Lyons insignia were protected by law and subject to criminal proceedings. The edges of well-used cards were also trimmed frequently so that they could be sold again as new!

The object on the card

The manufacture of playing cards during the 16th c.

The figures were initially engraved onto a block of wood. This was known as “*molle de carte*” (**Inv. 221 and Inv. 222 playing card moulds**). This German process known as xylography was developed in Lyons from 1482 onwards with the printing of the first illustrated books and then with silk printing on textiles. The figures were grouped together in 4 rows of 5 cards on the boards: the Jacks often occupied the first place, to the top left (**Inv. 39.90 Template for 20 cards**). The imprint of the image was then reproduced by stamping on a sheet of paper.

Four sheets of backed paper formed a card and gave it its cardboard texture: The “*traced paper*” sheet received the printout, two sheets of “*mesclage paper*” stiffened the whole product and “*cartier paper*” formed the back of the card. Once printed, the cards were hand painted with a stencil and then cut out. Lastly, the printed surface of the cards was covered with soap and placed on a soothing board (a table comprising a marble plaque) so that the cards slid easily between the hands.



Lyons playing cards, taken from wood engraved at the Vital Berthin Workshop, Master engraver Jacques, late 15th c., Inv. 466.6

Card typologies

The playing cards were sold in packs of six card games (the “sizains” – packs of six) or in “grosses” (24 sizains – packs of 24). A royal document of 1607 distinguished 3 card grades: “fine” cards, the most precious of all, “average” cards (also known as “*triailles*”: obtained by sorting fine cards) and “small” cards. They were also distinguished according to the type of game (Tarot, Piquet or Quadrille cards, etc.) or their destination: the Lyons card manufacturers produced card types specific to almost every exporting country.

Cards “with a portrait of Lyons”

In the different towns, the card manufacturers tacitly adopted common details. Thus it was possible to identify cards manufactured in Paris, Marseilles and Lorraine, etc. They were said to be “*portrait*” cards. The “*portrait of Lyons*” (Inv. 42.235 **General cards of Lyons**), sketched from the 16th c. onwards, presented the following characteristics:

- the kings carried a fleur-de-lys sceptre, the King of Hearts also carrying a parrot, and the King of Clubs a cruciferous globe,
- the Queen of Hearts and the Queen of Spades also carried a sceptre,



Queen of Hearts – a playing card focusing on the General features of Lyons, anonymous, 17th c., Inv. 1564.1.4



King of Clubs – a playing card focusing on the General features of Lyons, anonymous, 17th c., Inv. 42.235.7

- whilst the Queen of Diamonds carried a sunflower,
- the Jack of Spades, wearing a helmet with visor, was armed with an axe.

It seems as though the women did not inspire the engravers of Lyons: their faces lack charm and their attitude remains rather stiff whereas the men – kings or jacks – were of fine appearance.

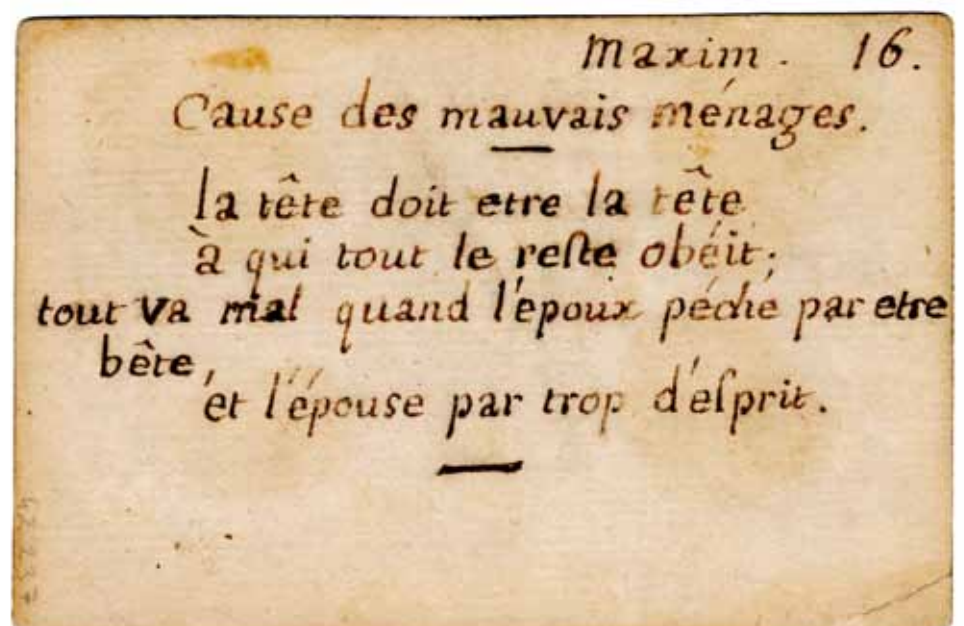
Uses of playing cards

Game rules

In 16th c. France, people played cards in the own homes as well as at the cabaret, in shops, at the inn or liqueur seller’s. It was prohibited to play cards during mass because the games were reputed to trigger agitation and distance men from all things sacred. In February 1584, Henri IV actually introduced a “*taxe de la débauche*” (debauchery tax) amounting to 2 sols parisis* on each card game! From the early 17th c. onwards, an envelope system (Inv. N 3745 and 1568.2 **card game envelopes**) was established in order to control payment: they were given to the card manufacturer by the tax collector under the guise of a receipt.

When the cards had fine backs...

At a time when paper was both rare and expensive, worn playing cards served another purpose: the backs of the cards were used to jot down all sorts of information, drawings, music notes, appointments, maxims, passes or declarations of love. On the back of some of the cards on display, the manuscript or printed notes seem to suggest that they were used as business cards or to advertise certain professions (owner of a delicatessen, dyer, hosier, etc.).



Cause des mauvais ménages (the cause of bad housekeeping), maxim 16, back of a Lyons playing card, 17th c., Inv. 42.237.1

glossary

Sol parisis: money used in the former system equivalent to 1/16th of the *Livre tournois* (French pound).