

More Desert Island Decks

Franco Pratesi (27.12.1992)

The following is intended as another contribution to the lists of 'Desert Island Decks' chosen and described by several Society members. Here there are some differences, however. Obviously, it is to be expected that everybody's choice is influenced by his own taste, and primarily by the items actually present in his own collection. For instance, I guess that any really ancient specimen will always try to find out its way into that island. In my case, the choice is not difficult now, being restricted to a score of recent decks. First of all, let me clarify how that small number has been reached.

As my hobby consists in the study of the historical development of games, and especially of so-called games of skill, I have come in contact with collectors of games and in particular of playing-cards. In the course of last seven or eight years, the number of decks that for one reason or another I considered worth purchasing had increased over a hundred: too many for someone not calling himself a collector. During recent months, however, I had occasion to reflect on collecting and collectors. Finally, I must admit that I will never be a real collector (maybe apart from books, a lot of which I have indeed ended up collecting as working tools for my researches).

So, I could quietly draw the conclusion that it was not at all necessary for me to die before transferring almost all my collected decks to my children. That I have now just done, much to their surprise and without arousing in them any particular enthusiasm. In any case, Lorenzo will be the Pratesi member of the Society from now on, for as long as he wishes. In the coming years, I shall repeat my early procedure, when I asked people like Sylvia Mann, and the then Secretary Maurice Collett and Editor Trevor Denning, to accept my articles for the Society Journal, even if I could not consider myself a collector and did not join the Society. Hopefully, there will be a similar kind of welcome as I thankfully have to acknowledge for those days.

After the necessary preamble, let us now consider my few 'remaining' decks. I think their choice needs some justification. Remembering the teaching of Sylvia Mann, I begin with some decks intended for play:

- several Florentine cards
- tarot for-play and cucu
- a few Eastern Asiatic specimens
- "Chess'O'64", an odd Bombay deck, supplied to me by Kishor Gordhandas (its interest is only due to the various games suggested in the two covering booklets).

But that is not all: some 'artistic' decks might be welcome on the island:

- "The Deck of Cards", by Studio Seven. I don't know a more 'artistic' item. Were it not for Sylvia Mann's teaching, this would likely represent the very first deck for any beginner collector.

- "Russian Jubilee" – though I never saw the original and I am rather doubtful about the quality of this reproduction.

- "Moehsnang" by AGMüller, also because it was only recently that I could get it;

- "Rudolf Pointner Tarot" by Piatnik. It seems unavoidable for painters to persist in a sad attitude whenever they draw tarot cards; here, this romantic state of mind is fortunately reduced to a minimum.

- "Ditha Moser Tarot" in the Piatnik facsimile, for the same reason as above, and for an additional rigour in the execution.

- "Can You Believe Your Eyes?" by InterCol. Visual illusions are interesting in themselves, as also playing-cards may be. I am not an enthusiast for this deck where the two things are merged. However, I can add to it a loose card, which is not to be found in a general collection. It also bears a

proper name, "The Yannuzzi Card. Copyright 1981 BMI. A service from Lu Esther T.Mertz Retinal Research Fund". It is a 'common' playing-card (dimensions 86x55 mm), where the face bears some indications and lines for writing the owner's address, while the back is uniformly black except for a white grid of 16x10 squares. The central intersection point is marked by a larger dot on which you have to focus and check whether the grid keeps its regular geometric aspect to your vision.

- Finally, some other loose cards: my few IPCS membership cards.

If I may now express my final balance as a collector, I would say that a first criterion for appreciating a playing-card, as for many other collectors' items, is its antiquity. In front of a really old card, the question whether or not it was deemed for common play may be of interest to historians, not so much to collectors.

As for recent decks, I understand that most of the European regional patterns are now spending their last years, and that collectors are called upon to preserve these specimens and to try exactly to reconstruct their origin. To satisfy such requirements on a European scale is a hard task; in a near future, the huge contribution offered by Sylvia Mann will probably be found only to represent a necessary preliminary step. Personally, I will go on studying the question mainly within the narrow limits of Florentine cards.

On the other hand, it also remains true that a collector's item is something unusual, practically by definition. There are many items which people collect. the main criterion everywhere - even for playing-cards before Sylvia Mann - has been the search for something different from everyday items. In short, it is to be expected - in respect of authors of remarkable books on the subject - that always there will be a Karl Graak* beside a Sylvia Mann. Moreover, the path indicated by Miss Mann clearly appears to be the harder one to follow strictly; as a partial justification, there is a remark already put forth, namely that she herself does also own a lot of beautiful decks which were never intended for actual play.

*Karl Graak, *Künstler-Spielkarten des 20. Jahrhunderts*. DuMont Buchverlag, Köln 1985.