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**SPECIAL ISSUE 1**

**CARD**



**CULTURE**

**FROM THE EXPERTS AT THE 52 PLUS JOKER CLUB**

Enjoy this sample issue featuring some of our finest articles to date!  
Just one of the many benefits of membership in our society!

**THE WORLD'S ONLY MONTHLY PLAYING CARD MAGAZINE**

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SUMMER 2015 - SPECIAL ISSUE 01

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF DON BOYER

If you're reading this, odds are that you're a playing card collector of one kind or another. We come in a variety of shapes, sizes, locations around the globe, and so on. The only things more diverse than we are are our collections; be they modern, vintage or antique, extensive or exclusive, valuable to the world or valuable only to us - even whole decks or individual cards. But the fact that we collect playing cards binds us together.

This lifestyle we share has undergone major changes in recent years. It wasn't that long ago that eBay as a marketplace for vintage cards was being looked at with a wary eye (for some, it still is), that companies like Ellusionist and Theory11 were in their infancy and weren't even making playing cards yet, that there was one company that dominated the custom card-making world in this country - and

they required minimum print runs too large for almost any one person to afford or manage. Crowdfunding didn't exist - if asked, one might guess it was defined as "paying for the extras in a movie to fill a scene or pack a playhouse." Markets outside of North America were almost completely ignored; few decks left the continent and fewer decks came back, besides the "dollar-store specials" made of cheap cardboard.

As the market, and the lifestyle, both evolve and grow beyond what was once only recently thought possible, **CARD CULTURE** will be there to inform, entertain and perhaps even guide. In concert with the *52 Plus Joker Club*, our sister publication ***Clear the Decks*** and our official forum, **[PlayingCardForum.com](http://PlayingCardForum.com)**, we are bringing the culture of playing cards to you. Discover what you've been missing!

# EDITORIAL - IS THERE A PLAYING CARD GLUT?

ASSOCIATE EDITOR LEE ASHER - FROM ISSUE 04, MARCH 2015



THE 52 PLUS JOKER CLUB DECK, WITH SILVER FOIL ON THE CARD BACKS.

I was having a phone conversation with an older magician friend of mine when he flippantly asked if the glut of custom playing cards being produced these days was beneficial.

Initially, I was taken back by this question. For those of us living and breathing playing cards, of course it's constructive. There's no question. However, I realized it must not be as obvious to others who know little about the playing card industry, especially the playing card culture.

So I explained that it doesn't take a psychologist to comprehend that the decks we are attracted to, use for playing and performance and collect in our vaults speak to our own personalities and personal beliefs. They help make us unique, and it's fair to say all these modern decks are simply catering to this meaningful need. They offer a bit of happiness to those who find part of themselves represented within the design, color, and even texture of the deck.

Maybe it's the same reason why Gus Berens, a printer at Russell & Morgan in the late 19th century, expressed his feelings for a bicycle (the latest fad at the time) on the back of a deck of cards? As they say, the rest is history.

Technically, the rest is innovation. It's single-handedly the most important reason why this so-called glut of custom playing cards being produced these days IS beneficial!

At the grassroots level like Kickstarter, we actively watch playing card projects that the masses want produced. That, in itself, is an innovation. Nonetheless, because of the inherently low risk involved with crowd-funding a project, more avant-garde, ground breaking concepts are put forth. These kinds of ideas won't be attempted by any of the larger card producers who won't risk too much and/or refuse to use crowd-funding to test what audiences do or do not want.

The Internet encourages fans to connect with artists, which in turn encourages artists to push the limits as to what they can create. It's a beautifully symbiotic relationship. All the while, playing card manufacturers are looking for innovative ways to accommodate. As a result, forgotten techniques are making major comebacks in modern ways.

For example, the idea of incorporating foil into the back design (i.e., the 52 Plus Joker 2014 Club Deck) has re-surfaced in popularity. With advances in technology, deck artists are now only limited by their own creativity.

Therefore, I have a hard time interpreting all this as a foreshadow for doom & gloom. To clarify, there isn't a glut of playing card projects. As a matter of fact, we're in a wonderful age of innovation & progress.

\*Special thanks to [Jim Knapp](#) for filling in some of my Bicycle history.



# “ASK THE EXPERTS” - CIRCUS NO. 47

FROM ISSUE 04, MARCH 2015



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CIRCUS NO. 47 CARD BACKS - EQUESTRIENNE IN GREEN, EQUESTRIENNE IN BUFF, HIPPODROME IN GREEN.

Maxime Heriaud, known as “Cryptocard27” on [the Playing Card Forum \(PCF\)](#), asks this question of our experts:

*Have you ever seen somewhere, except in sample books, a Circus #47 deck with the Hippodrome back? Do you think that this back is rarer than the Equestrienne? Do you know if these two different backs were issued with the two versions US21 & US21a? Thanks in advance for your help.*

Rod Starling replies:

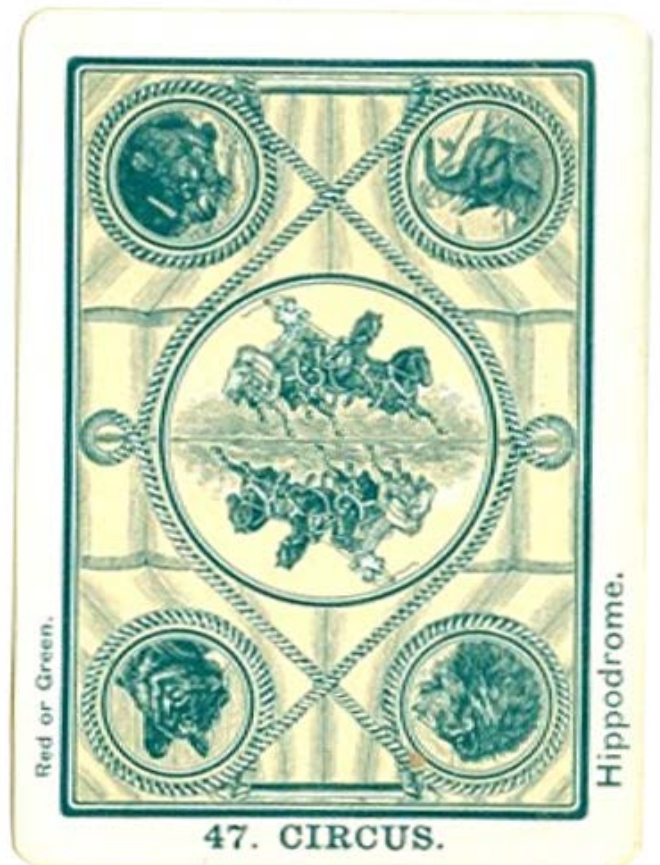
*This is a very rare deck even though it was in production for quite a long time. However, it may possibly have been made for children thus resulting in a very low survival rate.*

To this, Tom Dawson adds:

*These Circus decks are very scarce in mint or near mint condition - and will sell for \$1,000 [Canadian].*

Read the original forum posts [here](#) - with more images!

Do you have a question you'd like to ask the experts? Click [here](#) after you've logged in at [PlayingCardForum.com!](#)



# IS THIS THE WORLD'S OLDEST COMPLETE DECK?

CLUB PRESIDENT TOM DAWSON - FROM ISSUE 04, MARCH 2015

A couple of weeks ago I received an email from Lee Asher with the subject "Is This True?" That was intriguing enough to look over the email for the subject of the question, which it turned out was a link to [an online article at Business Insider](#) by Megan Willett entitled "The World's Oldest Full Deck Of Playing Cards Was Almost Lost To History"

Lee's question was "Is this the oldest complete deck of playing cards known?" Before attempting to answer I read the article and did a little research in our library. Fortunately, despite the chaos in the bookshelves, I was able to put my hands on a 14-page catalogue that Sotheby's produced for this one lot when they offered it at auction on 6th December 1983.

Reading the extensive catalogue convinced me that the claim to be the oldest 52 card deck [four suits of 13 cards] extant was indeed factual – so, Lee, there is your basic answer! Let me give you the exact wording of Lot #70 as it was described in the catalogue:

**70. A COMPLETE SET OF FIFTY-TWO PLAYING CARDS** comprising fifty-two cards in four different suits, **ILLUMINATED on pasteboard, each card rectangular with rounded ends. C.138mm. by 71mm. made up of 4 layers of paper (with 2 watermarks, see below)pasted together, drawn in black and dark brown ink,**

*coloured with wash mainly in red, blue-purple and yellow-brown and with gold and (sometimes) silver, versos blank, some early seventeenth-century interleaving sheets, some slight stains and signs of use, generally in extremely fine condition. [South Flanders, possibly Lille, c. 1470-85]*

The provenance described in the catalogue states that they were auctioned five years earlier, as Lot #50 at the auction house Hôtel Drouot where they were described as "Jeu de Tarots unique... d'un type non identifié" and dated "from the 16th century." Of course they were not Tarot cards, rather a full set of 52 cards playing cards in four suits.

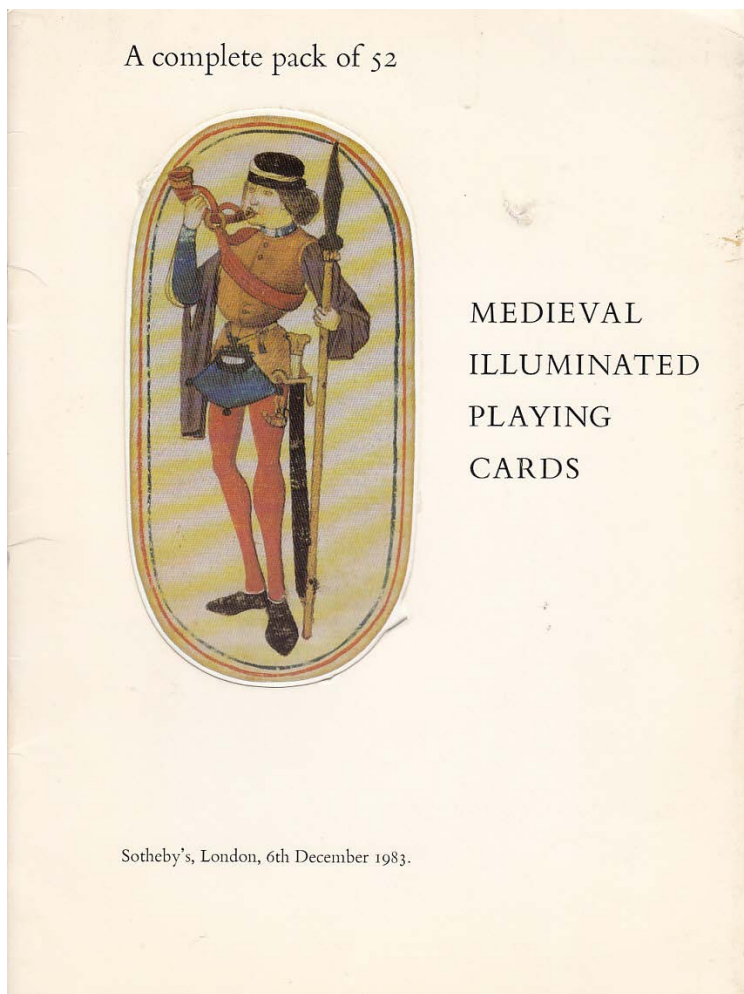
There is more to the provenance than reported. After the Sotheby's sale, I had heard that the Lot 50 at Hôtel Drouot had been purchased by an antique dealer in Amsterdam, who had done substantial research into the cards before consigning them to Sotheby's. In fact, most of the extensive information pertaining to Lot 70 had been discovered in the five years between the Hôtel Drouot and Sotheby's sales.

The story becomes more personal as in 1988 I was asked to do some work for our Netherlands firm in Amsterdam. As it was August I decided to extend the trip and take Judy and our youngest daughter (then aged 12) with me for some vacation in Netherlands and subsequently England. We arrived on a Sunday in early morning, checked into our hotel and decided that the best thing to do to quickly resolve the jet lag was to forego the allure of sleep and instead spend the day walking around Amsterdam. We had a wonderful day, in warm and sunny weather, and late in the afternoon found ourselves looking in the window of an antique shop which has some playing cards displayed. The shop was open, we were welcomed by the proprietor and soon found ourselves in deep conversation about our favourite collectable – it turned out he had a collection himself and had often dealt in cards from his shop.

He had many stories about cards and knew most of the good European collectors. Of course, one of his stories was how he had purchased a unique deck from a French auction house which had subsequently sold at auction at Sotheby's in 1983 for the princely sum of \$143,000! At the time of his purchase he was skeptical about their dating and was subsequently proven correct when it was determined that they were a century older!

As many know, the purchaser was the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where it is on rotating view in the Cloisters Museum in New York. ([Link to the Met's page on this deck.](#))

The card designs all have a hunting theme. The catalogue notes that "The art of the chase is at the centre of late medieval aristocratic leisure, and many surviving early playing cards have a hunting theme." The suit signs are all items of hunters' equipment. They are as described in the catalogue:



A complete pack of 52

MEDIEVAL  
ILLUMINATED  
PLAYING  
CARDS

Sotheby's, London, 6th December 1983.



- **The Horn.** This is the central instrument of the hunter's attire. The court cards here show it being blown and worn around the neck.
- **The Dog Collar.** This is worn by the hounds and comprises a band of red leather split at its ends and riveted to a 3-linked metal chain supporting a ring-swivel.
- **The Double Nooses.** These comprise a metal ring threaded through with a single rope tied at each end with a small noose. They were no doubt used for carrying small game.
- **The Ropes.** These comprise a long rope tied in a bundle and threaded round a short stick. Again, this rope is seen in a bundle like this hanging from the waist of hunters in medieval pictures.

The cards are oblong with rounded ends, a very unusual feature at that time. There seem to be two styles (certainly contemporary, and the main artist draws his pictures in brown ink and surrounds them with a frame with blue on the inside and red on the outside; all the courts are by this painter. The 1-9 of Horns and 1-10 of Dog Collars are in a slightly different style; drawn in black ink and their frames have red on the inside and blue on the outside.

The 1-10 of each suit comprise multiple pictures, without indices, of the Horn, Dog Collar, Noose and Rope. The Jack of Horns shows a young man holding a lance and blowing a horn; the Queen of

Horns holds a rose surmounted by a horn. The King of Horns has a sceptre surmounted by a horn.

The Jack of Dog Collars has a pennant with a Dog Collar emblem and the Queen of Dog Collars is richly dressed and holds a blue shield with three dog collars in red. The King is in golden armour embroidered with three dog collars.

The Jack of Nooses is the court fool in his classic outfit holding a stick impaling a fool's head. The Queen of Nooses is finely dressed and holds a noose between her finger with a double noose hanging from waist. The King of Nooses holds one hand to his chest and the other holds a staff with a double noose hanging from it.

The Jack of Ropes holds a mace-headed staff and four bundles of rope appear in the background. The Queen of Ropes is holding and pointing to a little piece of string wound through her fingers. Four bundles of rope surround her in the background. The King of Ropes is a mature grey-bearded man holding a huge sceptre and four bundles of rope appear in the margins around him.

**Editor's Note:** I was first made aware of this article via the [Taro Bear's Lair](#) Twitter feed. #WorthFollowing! - Lee Asher

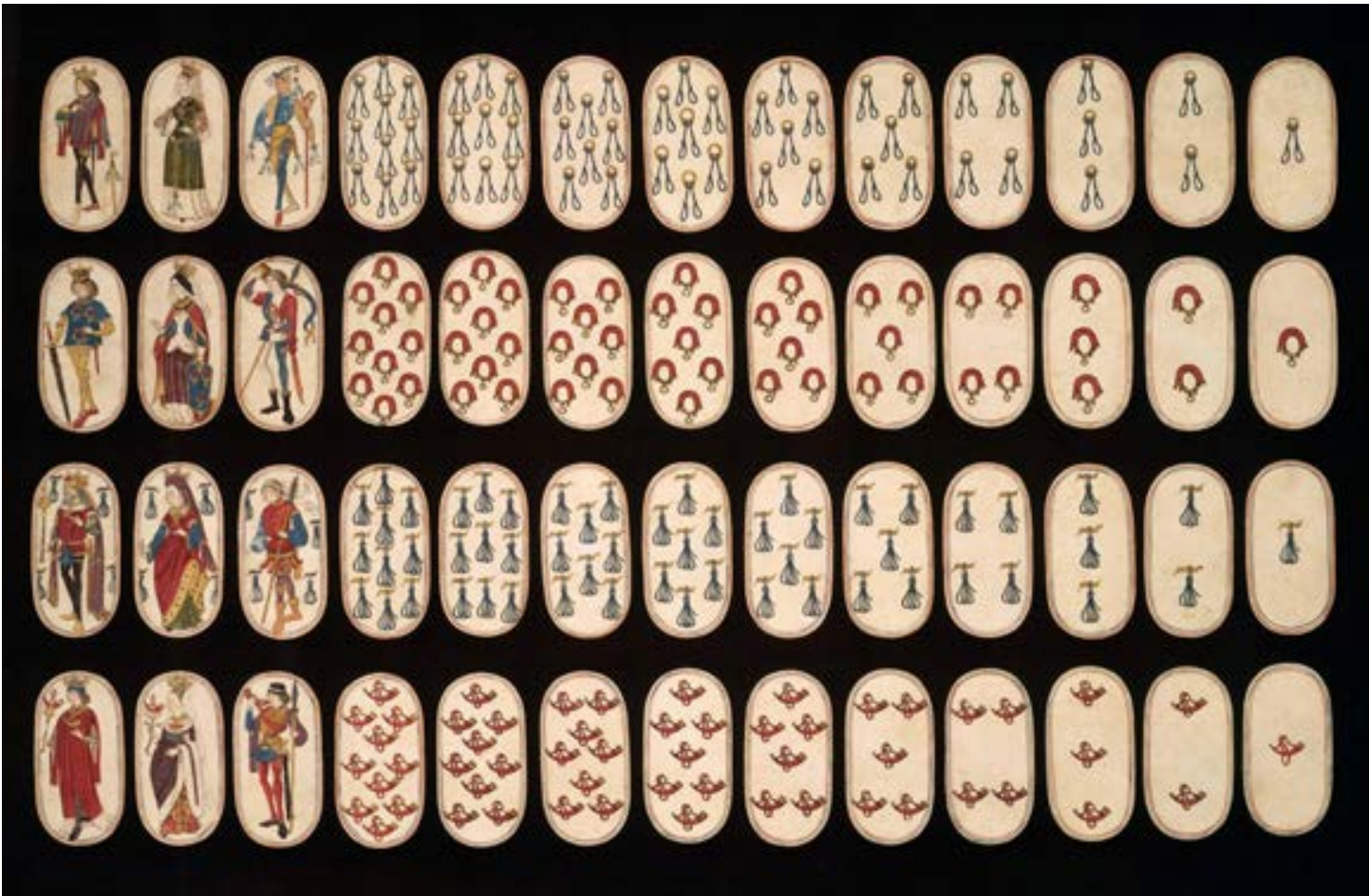
PREVIOUS PAGE: COVER OF SOTHEBY'S LONDON CATALOG FEATURING THE DECK, 6 DEC.1983.

THIS PAGE: COLLARS SUIT COURT CARDS (L TO R: KING, QUEEN, JACK).

NEXT PAGE, FROM TOP: FACES OF COMPLETE DECK, DOUBLE NOOSES SUIT COURT CARDS (L TO R: KING, QUEEN, JACK), NOTE THE JACK OF DOUBLE NOOSES "COURT JESTER" WARDROBE.









# GARGOYLE GENEALOGY: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

LEE ASHER, WITH ASSISTANCE FROM LANCE T. MILLER - FROM ISSUE 02, JANUARY 2015



THE CARD THAT STARTED IT ALL: MILLER'S "ANGEL BACK" BUSINESS CARD, THE INSPIRATION FOR THE GARGOYLES DECKS.

An artist's work never comes easy, and most times turn out far different than intended. Such is the case with Lance T. Miller's card projects. Mr. Miller didn't set out to create playing cards, or even to involve himself in the Magic, Collectible Cards, and Cardistry community like today.

Back in 2008, it started simply as a means to an end.

After coming out of a terrible bout of depression and uncertainty, Lance began wondering where his life was headed. His day job wasn't satisfying enough, and the thought of creating art for a living was a distant dream. Very few knew of him or his ability to create stunning art for playing cards. Even in Lance's case, he was unaware of the raw talent brewing inside him.

With a bit of soul searching, plus the will to succeed, Lance made an important decision. His thought was simple -- make a playing card design for a business card that would best represent him as a graphic designer. Having carried decks in his pocket since his

youth, designing a back design felt natural. As a matter of fact, Lance had no idea that this small leap, would result in a huge step forward for his career.

If you ask Lance, he exclaims, "*It was an amazing journey of self-discovery and self-representation through my art. Cards made sense because they were so much of a part of my entire life, having practiced card magic since age 7. I never thought I'd actually make playing cards for a living!*"

Equipped with the idea that he'd eventually make an entire deck of cards that featured his design projects printed on the faces, Lance went to work on the initial back design. Never before had he pushed himself like this. He drew two amazing angels -- that at the time he was sure he wasn't actually able to draw -- and had somehow been *divinely inspired*. It was a miraculous period of Lance's life.

Be that as it may, success was not around the corner.

Shortly after, Lance was laid off from his retail management job. He sat with his wife Amber, discussing their future. Times were extremely hard, and the cost to print the business cards was more expensive than they anticipated. They agreed that if Lance was to make a profession of this, he'd need to get these cards printed. In a defining moment in their lives, Lance and his wife took all their money and invested it into his business card in order for him to land freelance work. There was no room for failure!

Upon release, Lance's business cards were well-liked. The initial investment turned into almost ten times as much income in less than a year. While it's not a lot of money, the work he received more than paid for the cards. It also proved to both Lance and his wife that he was ready to be a professional.

Even though the card design seemed finished, it was about to take on a whole new life.

In mid 2009, Lance's services were requested by two companies in a single day. The first, Zeller + Gmellin, an ink manufacturer, had a trade show coming up and wanted to print and giveaway decks of cards with a Chicago Skyline theme. The second was from a company located in Germany called Diavoli. After seeing Lance's business card, they wanted to use the design for an upcoming deck being printed by United States Playing Card Company. But more on this later.

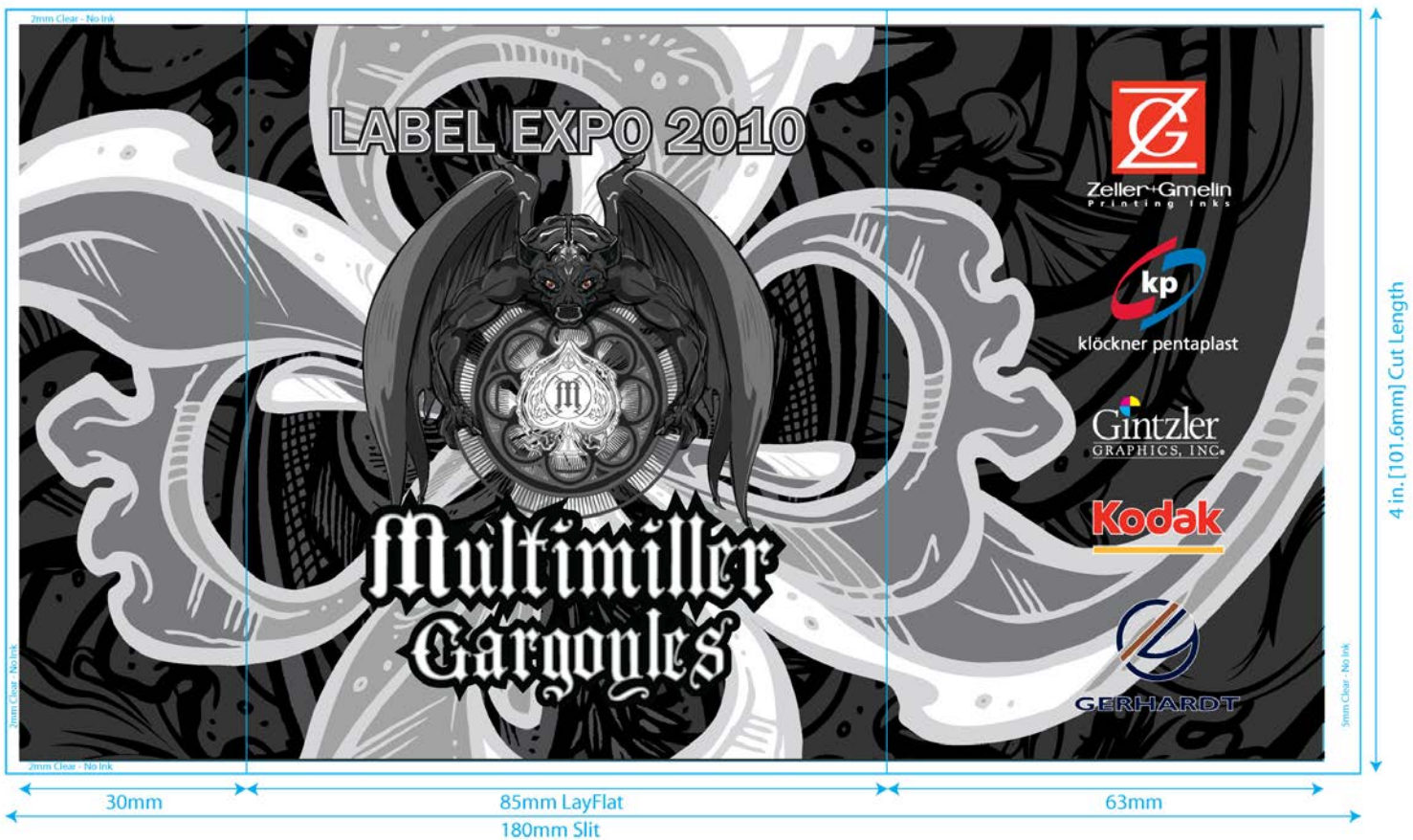
Pondering the request from Zeller to create a skyline deck, Lance felt that anyone could easily create that kind of design. He was looking for a challenge. With some brainstorming, Lance had an

epiphany. His mind's eye envisioned Chicago, even though he had never been to the "Windy City" before. This unbound creativity led him to think about Gothic architecture. From there, his mind made the connection to Gotham City and Batman ... wings! Within moments of distilling these ideas, he realized Gargoyles were exactly what this new project needed.

After a year of back and forth, the artwork was finally accepted and made its way through the proper channels. Eventually, the artwork came across Kodak's desk because they were partners on the project. Lance was told that his skulls were a little too garish and did not meet with the family friendly aesthetic Kodak wished to promote. Undaunted, Lance simply crafted a story line explaining why the skulls should stay. He was convincing enough that Kodak conceded, and the decks were manufactured in late 2009.

Shortly after completing his project with Zeller + Gmellin, Lance posted the Gargoyles design to his portfolio site and was once again contacted by the German company Diavoli. They now wanted to print these Gargoyles as well as the Angels. Deep down, Lance knew the Angels deck was not ready for market, even though each card had roughly 150 hours of work put into them. But he agreed to release the art for the Gargoyles under certain conditions. Diavoli complied, then set out to make the Artist's Edition Bicycle Gargoyles.

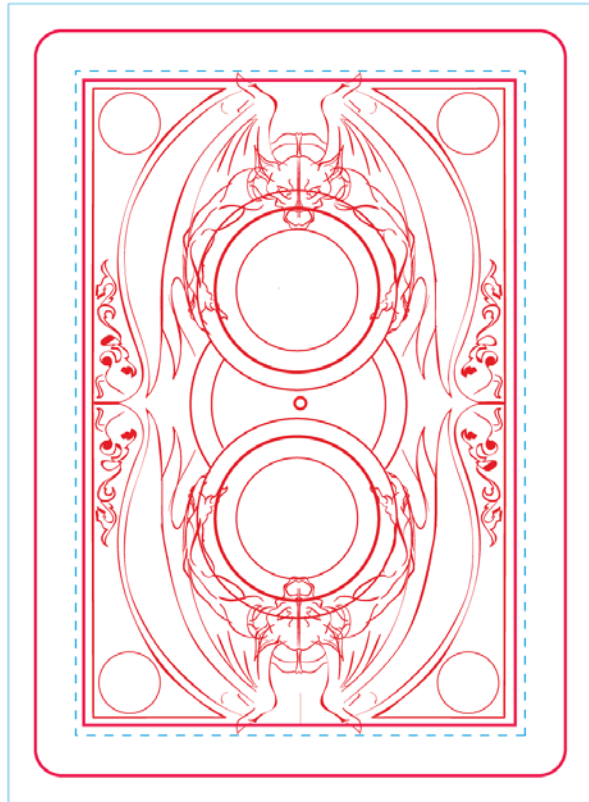
During the process, art for the project ended up on the playing card forum United Cardists. Included in the post was an old photo of Lance fanning his original business cards. At the time, the UC



THE SHRINK WRAPPER USED ON THE "MULTIMILLER" GARGOYLES DECK FOR ZELLER + GMELIN FOR LABEL EXPO 2010.



## Poker Die



**2009** - Miller pitched Angels to USGCC just to see if they were interested. Zeller + Gmelin and Diavoli contact Lance to use Angel Back design. Art for the Diavoli version of the Gargoyles gets posted on UnitedCardists and is mocked by the community. Miller responds and asks what the community would like to see changed then goes back and makes subsequent changes, to their shock and amazement. At the Tennessee Renaissance Festival, Lance reluctantly hands business card to Edward Beard Jr. - Famous Fantasy Artist and gets his first art/business mentor.

**2009 - 2010** - Miller utilizes Chicago skyline idea and Angel back concept to create a Gargoyles themed deck for Zeller + Gmelin to use at the 2010 Label Expo. The original skyline art was 8-bit ASCII art that a programmer quickly threw together. They asked him to draw a better one, then he pitched the idea of using Chicago window architecture and his angel concept as a gargoyle. They loved it, though Kodak asked him to change the skulls to roses. Miller refused on grounds that the skulls, with their silvery tongues of deceit, were actually part of a very positive message contained in the artwork for the Gargoyles. Kodak conceded.

**2010** - Miller releases Gargoyles deck art based on Angel Back theme and both Zeller + Gmelin and Diavoli announce printing of the decks. The Zeller+Gmelin "Multimiller" version was printed on plastic cards with standard faces, covered in shrinkwrap, while the Diavoli version was made more traditionally at USPC on pasteboard and using a paper tuck box as well as the Bicycle

community laughed at Diavoli and even mocked Lance and his art. Instead of arguing, Lance responded kindly. He simply asked the community what they wanted to see. He thanked all of the *naysayers* for their valid input and promised he'd do everything in his power to make a deck that they all could be proud of.

Lance made the changes, re-posted the artwork and the community was astounded. Never before had anyone included an entire card community in the process of developing a deck. Lance's reputation as an artist with integrity was solidified that day, and many became his fans who continue to support his projects and his art.

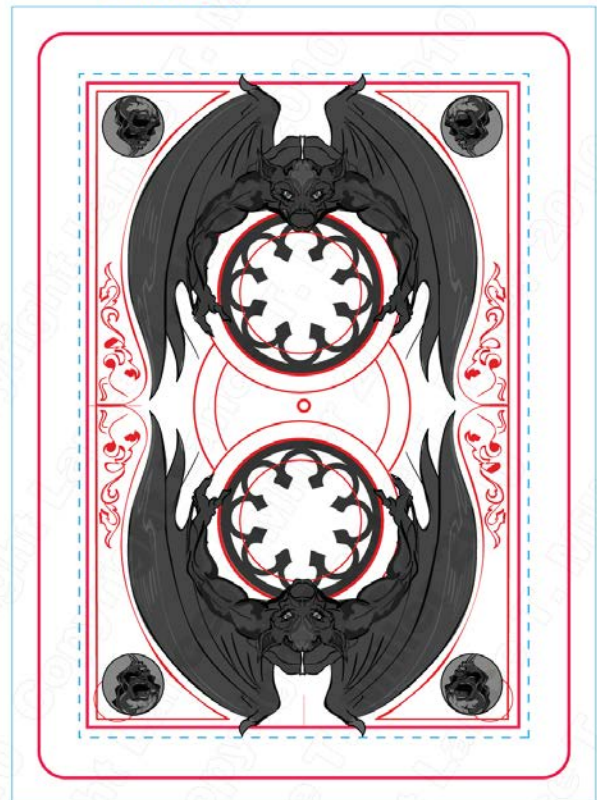
After printing the Gargoyles, Diavoli predominantly sold them in the European market. Legend has it that only a few hundred of these decks are actually on U.S. soil. Even more rare are the signed Artist's Edition Gargoyles sold by Lance Miller himself at conventions and public events.

Lance T. Miller and the Gargoyle design have been on a long journey. The road twisted and turned every step of the way. But in the end, they have arrived.

## GARGOYLES TIMELINE:

**2008** - Miller developed Angel Back business card under the company name "Multimiller." Spend last money in account to get business cards printed. Posted art on DeviantArt.com portfolio website, also under the "[Multimiller](#)" name.

## Poker Die



## Poker Die



- Miller personally owns only a single brick (one dozen) of sealed Artist's Edition Gargoyles and only 9 Multimiller Expo decks.

**Miller's actual unedited description in his own words on [his Deviant Art page about the Angels business cards](#):**

**Client:** Self: MultiMiller

**Objective:** Create a card that stands out in a sea of Graphic Designers' business cards. Get away from the status quo. The card was done in Photoshop and Illustrator all hand drawn, using a wacom tablet.

**Solution:** I prayed to God and asked him to help me create something the likes of which have never been seen. 3 nights in a row during a week that I was sick with that massive upper respiratory virus that was going around, God woke me up at 3am in the morning and got me to my computer. He took my hand and drew the most glorious thing I've ever drawn in my life. And I got to help. If you are not a religious person, and are doubting these words, feel free to contact me.

PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP LEFT AND TOP RIGHT; THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM RIGHT: THE PROGRESSION OF THE GARGOYLES CARD BACK. IN ORDER: PRELIMINARY SKETCH, THE GENERAL FRAMEWORK, THE MULTIMILLER LABEL EXPO 2010 DECK DESIGN AND A CARD FROM THE BICYCLE DECK.

brand name. At the Chicago Label Expo 2010, Multimiller Gargoyles are given out to show attendees; Miller is on hand to sign decks. At the Origins Game Fair, Ed Beard Jr. secures booth for Miller's debut as a fantasy artist. He receives award for best Contemporary Artist in B&W media for his Angel Back playing card back he created for his business card.

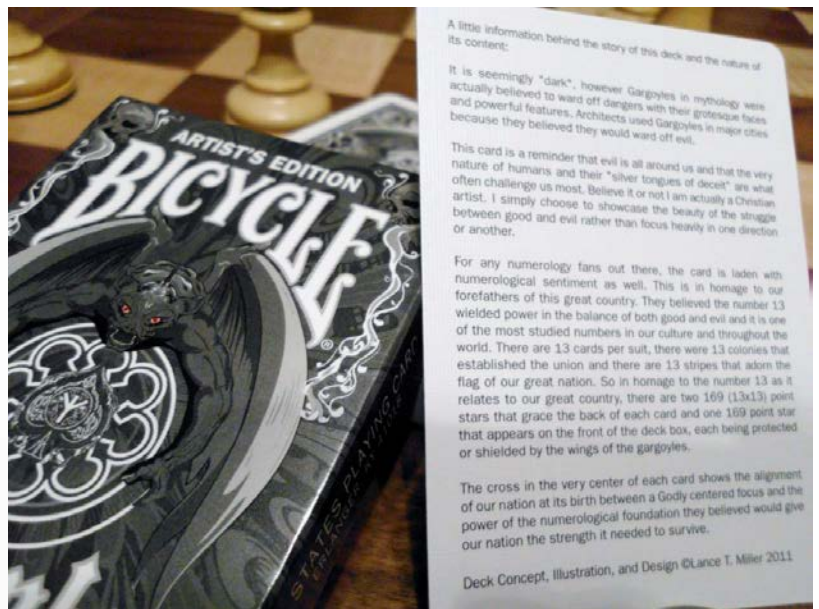
**2011** - At the Origins Game Fair, Miller receives best Contemporary Artist Color media for Artist's Edition Bicycle Actuators playing card back, his second deck design and his first deck created as a Kickstarter project. He subsequently releases two different B&W decks in the same design, a "Light Deck" and a "Dark Deck," also Bicycle-branded and funded by Kickstarter.

## OTHER FACTS:

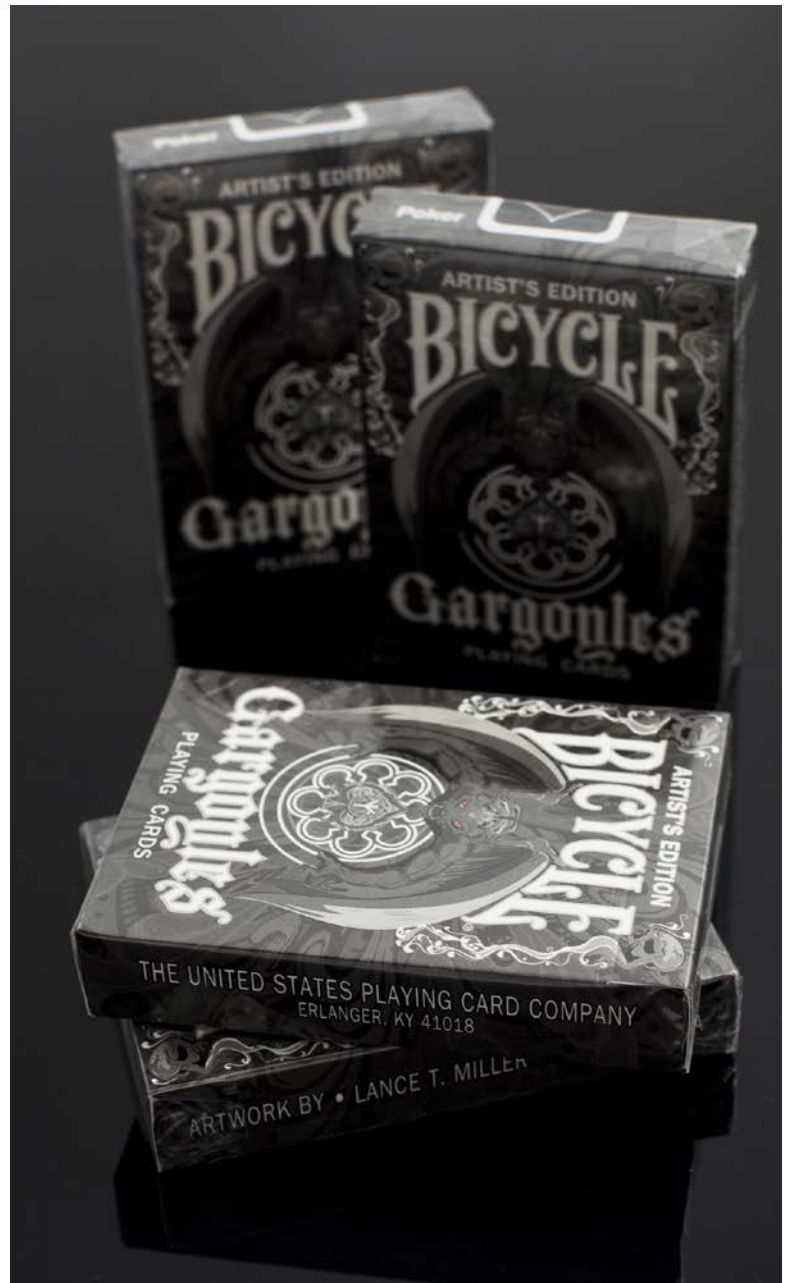
- 1852 copies of the Angel Back business card were printed; they've become collectible as well.
- Utilized standard red Bicycles (to quote Miller, "What I always carried.") to help him create his Angels design. He wanted it to seem like something that could have actually been a deck but was unique to his skill and ability.
- Pitched the Angels design to USPC in 2009 before Gargoyles were thought of. Was told he could make more money if he produced them on his own.
- One of the first decks to utilize the new coating "Magic Finish" from USPC and the first deck to mention Magic Finish on the tuck box.







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A STACK OF UNOPENED MULTIMILLER GARGOYLES, BICYCLE GARGOYLES WITH AN EXTRA CARD CONTAINING THE ARTIST'S NOTE ON ITS MEANING, SOME UNOPENED BICYCLE GARGOYLES.



**52 Plus Joker's**  
**PACK JACKET**  
 protect your deck

Pack Top

Sturdy & stylish

Oversized to comfortably fit your deck and tuck box

Blank area on spine to notate the specifics of your deck

Stackable for easy storage

(Pack not included)

THE EXPLORE THE CURRENT PLAYING CARD CO. THE EXPLORE THE CURRENT PLAYING CARD CO. THE EXPLORE THE CURRENT PLAYING CARD CO. THE EXPLORE THE CURRENT PLAYING CARD CO. THE EXPLORE THE CURRENT PLAYING CARD CO.

52 Plus Joker

52 Plus Joker

THE UNITED STATES PLAYING CARD COMPANY  
 ERLANGER, KY 41018

ARTWORK BY • LANCE T. MILLER

**"Gain piece of mind while fighting mother nature!"**

Super-sized, sturdy, & stylish, this case encloses and protects your deck. Whether on your collection shelf, in your backpack, or pocket, the 52 Plus Joker Pack Jacket protects your tuck case and/or playing cards. Made of sturdy card stock, beautifully printed inside and out and stamped with foil, this classy accessory makes a bold statement in any collection.

**Log into your 52 Plus Joker account and purchase.**

# WHAT'S IN AN EXPERT CARD? PLENTY!

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF DON BOYER - FROM ISSUE 08, JULY 2015

Talk to someone who collects modern cards - especially someone who uses them - and ask them to describe a typical deck for you. You'll hear things about the design - is it attractive, eye-catching, "minimalist," fully custom, has standard faces (recolored or in standard colors) and so on. There will be a few who mention the box - it's top-loading, side-loading, foil-stamped, embossed, debossed, has a custom serially-numbered seal, it has no seal, and so on.

Sooner or later, you'll hear things about the handling and the feel of the deck. It has this particular stock, it has that particular finish, it has such-and-such coating, it glides well, it's soft, it's hard, it's sticky, it was made on a humid but cool day in autumn while the sun was at perihelion and the moon was in retrograde...sure, my description starts to sound like nonsense, but so do so many other descriptions! Much about the materials used in the manufacturing of playing cards - specifically the stocks, finishes, coatings and inks - remains a mystery to not just the collectors buying decks, but even to some of the artists and designers that create and produce these decks as well. Even experts that rely on cards for their livelihood like professional magicians and gamblers may not know that level of detailed information about the tool of their trade. Manufacturers don't always provide clear information about their own products - so what's a card collector to do?

**CARD CULTURE** recently sat down with William Kalush, Executive Director of [the Conjuring Arts Research Center](#) (CARC), a nonprofit public charity which owns [the Expert Playing Card Company](#)

(EPCC/Expert), at his offices in the middle of Manhattan, in the shadow of the Empire State Building. We had a conversation about exactly what it is that goes into the making of a playing card deck - specifically, the components of which the deck itself is made.

I'll begin with the easiest part - a few definitions of common industry terms. "Stock" is the paper that's used to make the playing cards (and technically, it's also the paper that's used to make the tuck boxes they usually get packed in as well). The type of stock that a quality playing card is made of is known as pasteboard, a

name which is derived from the process by which it's made: two layers of paper are pressed together under pressure with a layer of glue that's been applied in-between the layers. The glue isn't just for holding the face and the back together - the glue is also laced with an additive, usually graphite, that acts as an opacifying agent in order to make the resulting stock completely opaque. When held to a bright light, a high-quality playing card

should let no light pass through, while a lesser-quality card might actually allow you to see the face through the back of the card.

"Finish" is a term that people seem to always get wrong - and it's not entirely their fault! In the simplest terms, the finish of a playing card is the texture of the card's surface. It is either completely smooth or it's embossed to a specific depth and in a certain pattern. If it is embossed, it can be embossed to varying depths and with different amounts of pressure. Many people confuse a card's finish with a coating that might be applied to



ASI WIND'S CHAMELEONS (CLASSIC STOCK/FINISH), AVAILABLE 15 JULY. NOTICE THE AMBIGRAM OF "AW" ON THE CARD BACK IS MADE OF METALLIC FOIL WHICH IS CATCHING THE LIGHT IN AN IRIDESCENT MANNER, CREATING A RAINBOW EFFECT.



A SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: STEVE MINTY'S MUERTOS DECK (DAMASK STOCK/FINISH), THE DAVID BLAINE CREATE MAGIC DECK (MASTER STOCK/FINISH), ASI WIND'S CHAMELEONS (CLASSIC STOCK/FINISH) AND A TEST DECK IN THE NEW, UNRELEASED "CODENAME: IRON STOCK/FINISH" (SIDES OF DECK INTENTIONALLY OBSCURED TO CONCEAL DECK DESIGN).





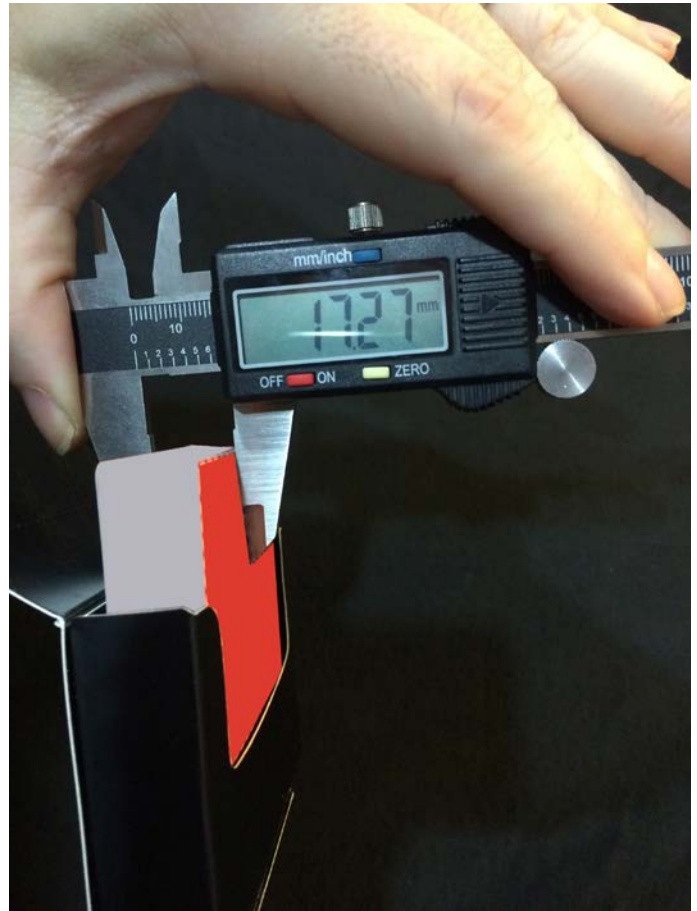
A DECK OF MASTER STOCK - DAVID BLAINE'S CREATE MAGIC DECK



A DECK OF CLASSIC STOCK - ASI WIND'S CHAMELEONS DECK



A DECK OF DAMASK STOCK - STEVE MINTY'S MUERTOS DECK



A DECK OF "CODENAME: IRON STOCK."  
IMAGE INTENTIONALLY OBSCURED TO CONCEAL DECK DESIGN.

NOTE THE MEASUREMENTS TAKEN ARE NOT 100% ACCURATE AND ARE FOR COMPARISON PURPOSES ONLY.

the surface, in much the same way as a finish on a woodworking project might be a coating like a stain, a shellac, a wax or a laminate. The marketing terms used at some other companies only seem to add to this confusion.

All EPCC stock comes to them already pre-embossed and ready for printing, sourced from different locations throughout Europe - precisely where is an company secret, to protect their sources from “poaching” by other manufacturers. Here’s where there’s an interesting difference between EPCC and their competitors’ products: there are four different stocks, each with a different finish pre-embossed on them before printing that’s unique to that stock. The primary difference between the finishes is the depth of the embossing. Expert doesn’t offer a completely smooth finish, though one of their embossed finishes comes very close to smooth. Because each stock has a unique finish, when someone at Expert is talking about a particular finish, they’re also talking about a particular stock as well! In some packaging, you may have seen the product names for the finishes referred to as “stocks” as well - and in this case, it would be accurate to do so! Kalush himself has been known to use their branded names to interchangeably refer to the paper or the finish on the paper.

#### Expert’s four stock/finish combinations are:

- **MASTER FINISH** - this was their first-ever stock/finish. It’s their thinnest, their least-embossed - and not coincidentally, their longest-lasting as well.
- **CLASSIC FINISH** - this is the second stock/finish the company started to offer. It’s a little bit thicker, the surface is more matte (less glossy or shiny), and the stock is somewhat softer.
- **DAMASK FINISH** - This is a newer stock/finish combination, not very widely used yet. One of the first decks to have this

new stock/finish was Steve Minty’s “Muertos” deck. It’s the thickest stock they’ve used to date, but is also the most deeply embossed, with the combination of features making it the softest stock the company’s offered.

- **“CODENAME: IRON FINISH”** - this particular stock/finish combination is not yet available for sale, but is expected to be available before the end of this year. It is the thickest, heaviest stock EPCC has ever considered using, and it’s entirely possible that it will be released with a different trade name than the “code name” they’re presently using for it. Kalush believes that the stock is so thick and heavy, card designers may want to use it only for the making of practice decks. A deck made of this stock is a full 2.5 millimeters thicker than their second-thickest stock, Damask. (For those among you who haven’t adopted metric measures yet, a single millimeter is about the thickness of a US dime, and 2.5 millimeters is just a little bit shorter than 0.1 inches.)

Another noteworthy difference in the stocks is their white value - the brightness of the stock before any ink has been applied. They’re all white stocks, but Classic is just a little brighter than Master, and both stocks are brighter than the Bicycle stock offered by the United States Playing Card Company (USPC). Additionally, all Expert and Legends decks are given a “traditional” cut, versus the modern cut used by most playing card manufacturers today.

“Traditional cut? Modern cut? What are you talking about?” Yes, we’ve heard these terms used now and then but not everyone knows exactly what they mean. Allow me to elaborate...

When a deck sheet (an “uncut sheet” that’s about to be cut into a deck) manufactured by a quality playing card printing company is cut, it’s usually cut into strips first, then the strips are fed through



UP CLOSE: ASI WIND’S CHAMELEONS DECK (CLASSIC STOCK/FINISH).



UP CLOSE: THE DAVID BLAINE CREATE MAGIC DECK  
(MASTER STOCK/FINISH).



a die cutter. Each card in a given deck is individually punched out in the same die, in order to insure that all the cards are the exact same shape. A printer might cut the strip into rectangles, then force several of these rectangles (each holding a single card) through the cutting die at once, sometimes several decks at a time. This time-saving measure, however, will usually result in a poorer quality edge - often there will be a visible “lip” created by the pressure of the plunger forcing all those cards through the die at once, and the edge will be so ragged, weave shuffles are exceptionally difficult to execute, with a perfect weave shuffle (better known as a “faro shuffle” because of its frequent use by faro dealers at casinos in the American Old West) being a near impossibility.

When a card is cut out by the die, it creates a bevel to the edge of the card where the sharp die edge penetrates the paper. A traditional cut is also called a “face-down” cut, because the card is pushed into the die with the front facing the die, so the paper is pierced by the die edge from face to back. A modern cut is called a “face-up” cut, because the cards are pushed into the die facing up, with the back facing the die so the cutting edge pierces the card from back to front.

The bevel created by the traditional cut makes the back fractionally wider and longer than the face, by just a tiny amount, perhaps a fraction of a millimeter - but that tiny amount makes a big difference when it comes to shuffling the cards. A face-down cut deck, fresh out of the box, will shuffle more easily while face down and when the cards are pressed together in a tabled weave shuffle, they’ll slide together while face down. The edge beveling of cards with a face-down cut allows for greater control of the shuffle, something that a real card expert with a sensitive touch will detect. Richard Turner, renown card expert, has an exceptionally sensitive

touch, as he relies on touch more than most, being legally blind. Every deck Turner has created with USPC has been a face-down cut, made on their heavier, casino-grade stock.

Take a deck that’s been cut face-up straight from the box, brand new, and try weave shuffling or faro shuffling it on the table, and you’ll have to do it while the deck is face up because of how the bevel on the card’s edge is reversed, with the faces being fractionally wider and longer than the backs. Because of this, it’s easy to see why casinos insist on having traditionally-cut cards, especially when a deck used in a casino barely has enough time to become broken in before it’s removed from play!

Now, if you’re like me, you might be asking yourself, “Well, if the traditional cut is so great, why did companies stop using it?” Well, it’s a simple issue of efficiency. Apparently, when manufacturing playing cards, the deck sheet needs to be flipped before it is cut to create a traditional, face-down cut - or at least, that’s what’s been said. Removing that extra step from the manufacturing process seems like a minor increase in efficiency, but when you’re manufacturing several thousand decks a day, little efficiencies add up fast to many, many dollars saved. The typical customer, not being the card sharp with a sensitive touch that Richard Turner is, doesn’t even notice the difference, and once the deck’s been broken in and the edge has softened, it will shuffle equally as well from either direction, even for weave and faro shuffles. That’s not to say that a broken-in deck will table faro better than a new one, regardless of the deck’s cut, because the level of precision needed is rather high (it’s considered the most difficult shuffle to execute), but it can be done with the cards facing up or down with the same level of ease (or difficulty, as the case may be)!

Another issue that's come up in the manufacture of playing cards has to do with the type of press upon which the cards were made, the two dominant choices being sheet-fed and web presses. The web press is a high-speed press where paper gets fed by the roll - rolls that are typically large enough to have thousands of deck sheets made from them. The paper is fed into the press in a continuous ribbon, much like the newspaper presses you might have seen in a movie or a television show, then is cut after it has been printed.

The sheet-fed press is different - the paper roll is cut into individual sheets first, then these sheets are fed into the printer. This makes for greater precision in both the number of sheets made for a smaller print run, but also a greater degree of precision in terms of how the cards are printed and cut. This is why, even for some larger custom deck print runs, producers will choose to have the work done on a sheet-fed press instead of a web press. A web press is generally used for high-volume manufacturing of decks - the most common task it would be used for at a big company would be the manufacture of their mainstay standard brands of playing cards intended for general retail distribution.

EPCC uses only a sheet-fed press when creating their playing cards. In fact, the press being used and the techniques used to operate it allow Expert to create decks with a very high degree of precision under Kalush's guidance and instruction. Registration between card backs and fronts is close to 100%, with a very low variance. Die cuts are also done with great care, resulting in near-perfect centering, so good that with the naked eye it is usually difficult if not impossible to find a variance in border width on a bordered card back design. For borderless designs, edges

are cut as perfectly as is possible, making edge sorting with the deck practically impossible. Edge sorting is a technique used by gamblers seeking an advantage by stacking a deck; it requires the use of a back design that's supposed to be two-way but in fact isn't because of a slight variance in how the card was printed or cut, especially in cases where the design has an edge that's printed into the bleed area (the area on the deck sheet that's beyond the die line where the card is cut and which ends up trimmed off the card and discarded - it's how a borderless design is created).

Now that the paper, the cut, the finish and the coating have all been covered, what's left? Plenty! Here's a brief listing of just some of the myriad features that EPCC can offer their customers when creating custom decks:

- Metallic inks, for the cards, tuck box or both.
- A variety of special tuck papers, including vellum and synthetic materials with light refractive properties.
- Embossing and debossing on the tuck box.
- Embossing on the cards and tucks through the use of UV spot coating.
- Metal foil hot-stamped into the cards
- Metal foil hot-stamped or bonded into the tuck box (the Delirium deck uses a tuck box with bonded foil).
- Printed tuck box interiors.
- Die-cut custom shapes for tuck boxes, including their very popular side-loading tuck box.
- Custom card shapes to suit any need.
- Extra cards - while the standard EPCC deck sheet has 54 cards, customers can choose as many extra cards as they desire for their designs, as well as getting a custom tuck box large



UP CLOSE: STEVE MINTY'S MUERTOS DECK (DAMASK STOCK/FINISH).





UP CLOSE: "CODENAME: IRON."

enough to hold them all.

- Custom brick box and half-brick box designs, available with standard or custom shapes.
- Foil-lined tuck box interiors.
- Custom seals, either with or without serial numbering, in custom shapes or materials.
- Slipcases - handcrafted for holding cards either with or without a tuck box.
- "Twin tuck" - a side-by-side tuck box large enough for two decks, as used in EPCC's "Classic Twins" design.

As amazing and incredible as this list may seem, EPCC never stops looking for new and creative ways to innovate in the field of playing card manufacturing.

In the end, I asked Mr. Kalush about exactly what he wishes to achieve with his work with Expert. His main mission, he stated, is to improve magic by offering magicians the absolute best tools available, chiefly, the best made playing cards available anywhere. His choices of finishes and stocks are heavily influenced by how well they work in sleight-of-hand techniques and how durable and long-lasting they are in real-world conditions. He taps heavily into the resources of his Conjuring Arts Research Center, utilizing strong, historical ideas about playing cards and classic design features that many people have never before seen, concepts that in some cases are over a century old, while at the same time remaining on the cutting edge of manufacturing and printing technology. The question remains if Kalush has achieved - and continues to achieve - his target. Many in the playing card community would say that if he's not on his mark, he's within a hair's breadth and getting closer with each shot!

As he did last year, Kalush and his company are sponsoring the 2nd Annual PCF Deck Design Competition at our forum site, [PlayingCardForum.com](http://PlayingCardForum.com). The contest rules can be found [here](#).

Many EPCC decks are available for sale at [the CARC shop](#), along with many fine books and accessories on playing cards and magic in general. Asi Wind's new Chameleons deck will be available for sale as of Wednesday, 15 July and comes in three colors with EPCC's new synthetic tuck box material, for a longer-lasting box with better card protection.

**CLUB DECK**  
 A limited number of our club decks remain available for purchase  
 Log-in to [52PlusJoker.org](http://52PlusJoker.org)  
**\$45 per deck**  
 Max two decks per member.



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