

Playing Cards & Toy Figures

Poker-faced James H. Hillestad shuffles his cards and deals an article betting that collectors can hit the jackpot with a unique graphic option for displays

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad



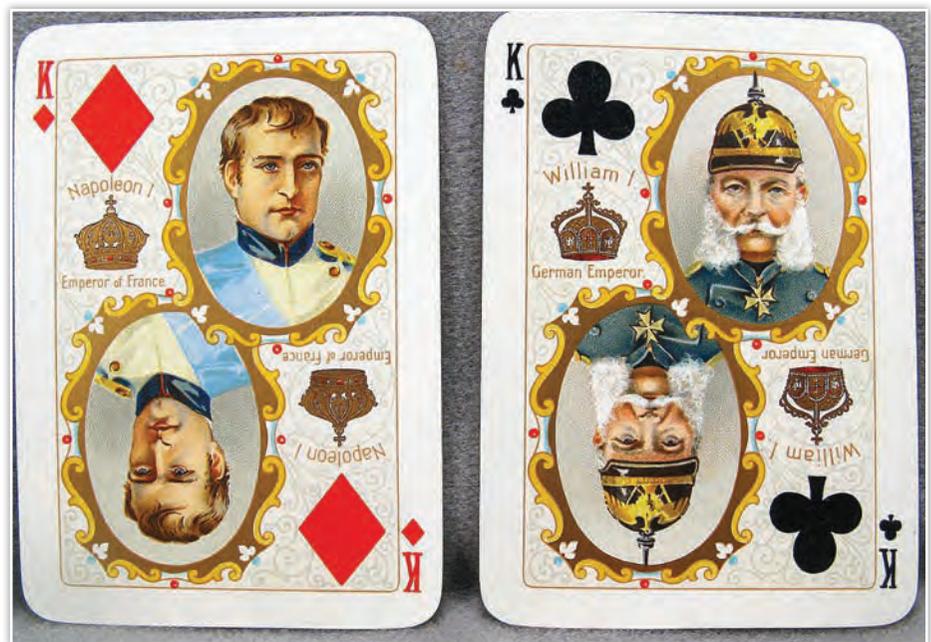
German propaganda card featuring inventor Count von Zeppelin and a German zeppelin flying over England.

In designing displays in my Toy Soldier Museum, I have incorporated all kinds of non-military artifacts in an effort to add context, depth and meaning. First-day covers, book jackets, cigarette cards, movie posters and even sardine can labels are examples of items I've employed.

These two-dimensional elements add interest and color. They help tell the story of what is being displayed. They take the viewer back in time and give credibility to the figures on display.

With this in mind, I recently discovered a new-to-me display aid: playing cards. Wow -- talk about graphics!

Illustrated in conjunction with this article is a sampling of the artistic talent that went into producing playing cards through the years. The detail, color and historical representations defy



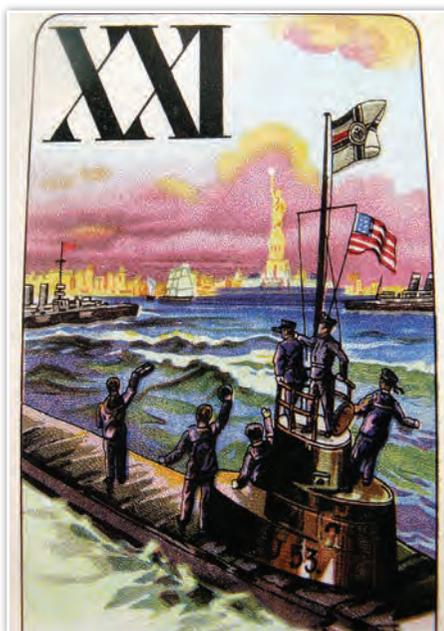
definition.

I am indebted to English-born Rod Starling, who has generously shared his premier collection of vintage playing cards with me. His 2010 book, "The Art and Pleasure of Playing Cards," is the ultimate reference for collectors of them.

ABOVE: Deck beautifully printed in 1900 showcasing personalities of the 1800s, such as Napoleon of France and German Kaiser Wilhelm I.

BELOW: Figures of Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson and William Tecumseh Sherman (from left) made by The AeroArt St. Petersburg Collection with American Civil War cards.

BELOW: Tarot card printed in Austria in 1918 dramatizing a World War I German submarine victoriously entering New York Harbor.





CARDS CHRONICLE

During a visit to the Brandywine Battlefield Museum in Chadds Ford, Pa., USA, I found the following excellent summary of the history of playing cards:

“From their origin in China, to the great courts in Europe and beyond, the history of playing cards is as diverse as the four winds. Whether used for pleasure, high-stakes gambling, education purposes or fortune telling, card playing has historically crossed every social and economic class, enjoyed by young and old, commoners and kings.

“In 1392, the royal treasurer to Charles VI, King of France, ordered three games of cards ‘for the diversion of our lord, the King.’

“By the early 15th century, the four suits as we know them today appeared when the French knight Lahire invented a game of knights and chivalry. Called piquet, the suit of hearts (“coeurs”) represented the church, diamonds (“carreaux”) the vassals, clubs (“trefles”) the husbandmen, and spades (“piques”) the knights themselves. And with the invention of printing, rare hand-painted cards available only to the wealthy evolved into a past-time for the masses.

“First brought to America by the

Spanish, the Indians of the Southwest painted cards on deerskin or sheepskin in the Spanish style. The French colonists brought playing cards to New France, the English to Virginia and the Dutch to New Amsterdam.

“By the 18th century, the sale of playing cards in America was so profitable, they were specifically targeted by the Stamp Act. George Washington played whist for

ABOVE: Cards from a deck made in 1945, celebrating the World War II Allied leaders.

BELOW: Cards celebrating Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Her Majesty’s image appears on the back of the cards in fine “illuminated” printing. The card faces portray former monarchs, including, as shown, King George III and his wife Charlotte.



toy soldier display ideas



money (and sometimes lost), yet in 1777 at Morristown, recognizing the dangers of gambling, he issued a general order forbidding 'ALL officers and soldiers playing at cards.' Ben Franklin enjoyed cribbage, and it is claimed that Paul

ABOVE: "A Game of Whist" by Phoenix Models.

RIGHT: "Aces & Eights: The Death of Wild Bill Hickok" by Sarum Soldiers.

BELOW: Blackjack table grouping made by Sarum Soldiers.

BELOW MIDDLE: "Draw Poker" vignette by Sarum Soldiers.

BELOW RIGHT: "An Afternoon Bridge Game" by Sarum Soldiers.





LEFT: "Painting the Roses Red" by Red Box.

Revere engraved plates for the printing of playing cards."

TOY FIGURE EXAMPLES

Card games and playing cards have interested toy soldier makers for years.

For example, Phoenix Models produced castings of a Regency period foursome playing whist.

Sarum Soldiers has created sets involving cards that include a game of bridge, Wild West saloon poker players and blackjack.

And for a bit of fantasy, there is Red Box of England's "Painting the Roses Red," based on an episode in Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland."

It's all in good fun and illustrates that the toy soldier world knows no bounds!

about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.

PLAYING CARD ART ADORNS CAROUSEL

Coincident with researching this article, my wife Carol and I visited the world-renowned Butchart Gardens near Victoria, B.C., Canada, in June 2012.

While enjoying the splendid gardens, we came upon a magnificent carousel. The walls of the building housing the merry-go-round are adorned with a series of four paintings titled "The Lion Kings." They depict King David, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Charlemagne.

Each piece measures 24 by 36 inches and is painted in the style of playing cards. I learned that they are the work of the very talented Jan Starkey Thomas of Salt Spring Island, B.C.

"Playing cards have always charmed me -- the imagery intrigued me," the artist said. "I collected playing cards, picture cards from old decks long since incomplete, tidbits that I could trade with my chums for other ones, kings, queens, jacks and jokers."

"Trying to paint the bottom of the card to look like the top was challenging," Jan noted, "but I was happy with the result."

The painter has creatively translated playing cards that you could hold in your hand into beautiful artwork. In addition to the word play associated with the names of "The Lion Kings" paintings, they conjure up all sorts of historical associations.

These are certainly something "outside the box!"

-James H. Hillestad

BELOW: The carousel at Butchart Gardens is adorned with card-themed paintings.



CIGAR BOX LABELS ADD TO DISPLAYS

Cigar box labels first started emerging from dusty old warehouses and abandoned factories in the 1960s. These beautiful examples of chromolithographic art, which had gone virtually unappreciated for decades, saw a new light when Bloomingdale's department store offered them at \$79.95 each during the 1978 Christmas season.

Major companies such as 3M gave them away as "executive gifts." On Sept. 7, 1979, The Wall Street Journal published a feature story on its front page about the explosive growth in popularity of cigar box labels.

Tobacco was first written about by Romano Pano, a Spanish monk who accompanied explorer Christopher Columbus on his second trip to America. Tobacco grew in popularity in Europe and its use spread all over the world.

Smoking a cigar was much more in keeping with enjoying the pleasures of tobacco in a "refined" atmosphere rather than constantly spitting and drooling tobacco juice or snorting snuff. By 1920, annual American consumption of cigars reached 8.2 billion, and only then was surpassed by cigarettes.

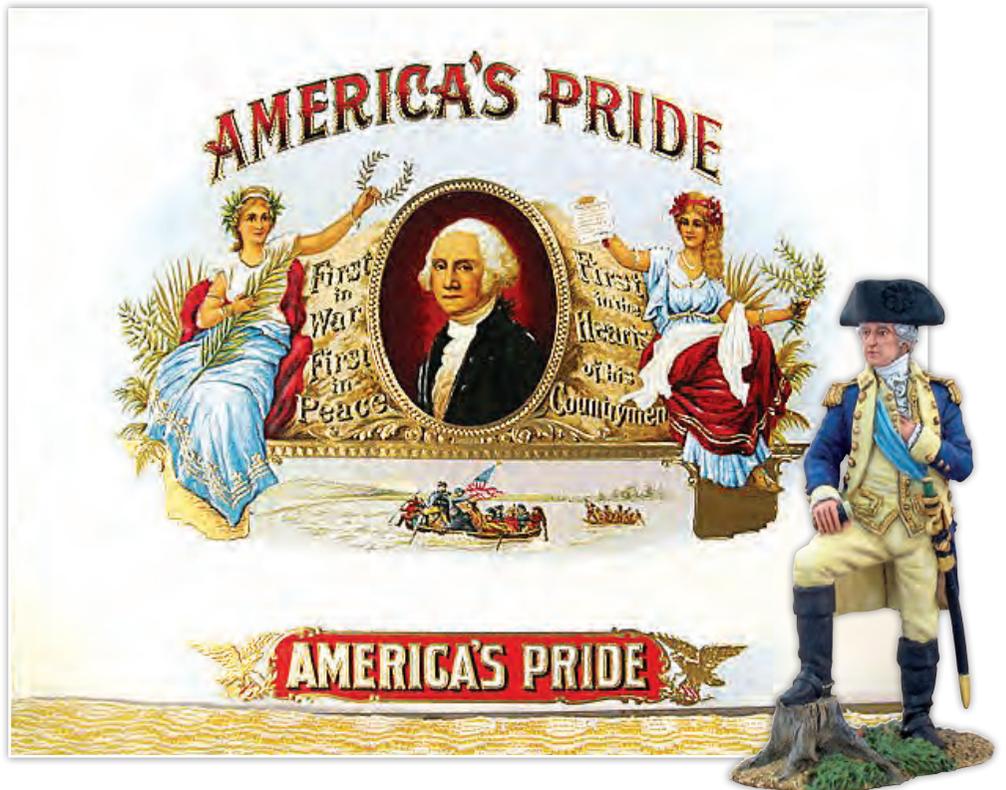
The eye-catching label on the inside of the circa 1900 cigar box was the forerunner of what we now call "point of purchase" advertising, as the box sat open in the display case. Bear in mind also that at that time only 55 percent of the public was literate, so the graphic art displayed was an important ingredient in marketing the cigars.

Cigar box label artwork presents a unique opportunity for collectors of toy soldiers to enhance their displays with historic ephemera. Whether you use original labels or reproductions from coffee table books, the result will be to add color and historic significance to displays.

--James H. Hillestad

ABOVE RIGHT: Cigar box artwork with a Napoleon figure by The AeroArt St. Petersburg Collection.

RIGHT: George Washington figure by W. Britain and cigar box artwork.



DID YOU KNOW?

Did you know that during the First World War, Norwegian sardine producers designed labels for their sardine cans to induce importers in England and Germany to market their products for propaganda purposes? These colorful, beautifully designed labels were printed in four colors -- an innovation at that time -- and have become a collectible, much like baseball cards.