

THE CARDS OF JOST AMMAN C1588

By Rod Starling

Having read with interest Tom Dawson's recent article in CTD of March, 2013, *The South German Engraver-Musings*, I thought that I might be so bold as to venture another article dealing with another early engraved deck of cards created by Jost Amman, c.1588.

The first reference to the Jost Amman playing cards c.1588 that I saw was on one of Gene Hochman's mail auctions in 1967. It was a colored facsimile of the deck and if I remember correctly, the minimum bid was around \$45.00. Later, I found other references to the deck that also pictured it in color. At the time, the deck did not appeal to me, the colors appeared to be little dark and the suit symbols of Books, Printer's Pads, Wine Pots and Drinking Cups seemed to be too cumbersome and too much of a radical departure from the French suits. However, my later research of other early German engraved decks, like those of the *South German Engraver*, the *Hofampterspeil* and the deck of *I.M.F.*, invariably disclosed references to the cards of Jost Amman and the more I considered that deck, the more I liked it.

There is a considerable amount of information on the internet about Jost Amman which is mostly biographical and dealing with his many paintings and engravings, but not about his deck of cards. Accordingly, other than mentioning that Jost Amman was born in 1539 and died in 1591, I shall limit this article to a discussion of his deck.

It seems that the deck was not actually created as such but rather, was a set of illustrations included in a book titled *The Book of Trades* published in 1588. I set about searching for the facsimile deck that I had seen on Hochman's mail auction and found that it had been issued in 1967 by *Editions Leipzig* together with a German/English book. I also found out that unfortunately, *Editions Leipzig* no longer exists. Nevertheless, I did find two offerings for sale of the facsimile. One was on eBay and one was on the internet. Both sellers priced the deck at \$165.00. I also found a limited edition of the deck issued in 1985 by Edizione IL Meneghello for \$31.50. The problem was that while the 1967 facsimile was colored and came with a book, the 1985 facsimile was black and white and included only a small pamphlet in Italian.

The first question that I had was whether the original cards were colored or black and white. Given

its age, I felt that the original deck was probably black and white so I therefore purchased the 1985 black and white facsimile. I was not disappointed as it turned out to be very impressive. Well executed engravings usually reproduce very well and this facsimile was no exception. I was then able to compare the black and white cards with the colored ones pictured on eBay and found that the color seems to wash over many of the engravers' cuts that make up so much of the detail. That established to my satisfaction that the original cards were black and white. I do not think that such a detailed black and white facsimile could have been made from a colored original. Rather, the black and white facsimile, with all of its details of engraving, would necessarily have had to be made from black and white originals. Therefore, as nice as the colored version is, I prefer the details of the engravers' art that have been preserved in the black and white facsimile. To further satisfy myself that the original engravings were uncolored, I checked the website of the *Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York City and found 14 different engravings by Jost Amman and they are all black and white. I also found www.allposters.com, a website that sells prints of old engravings and it displayed two by Jost Amman, both black and white.

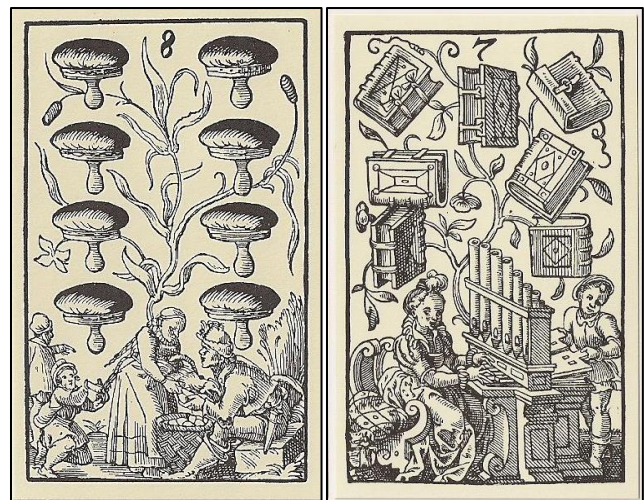
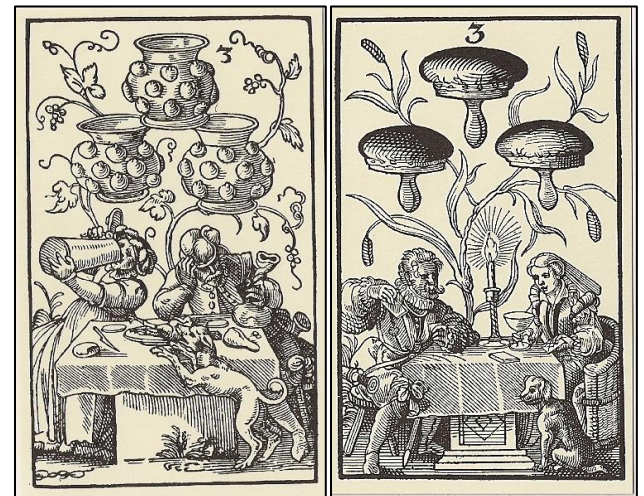
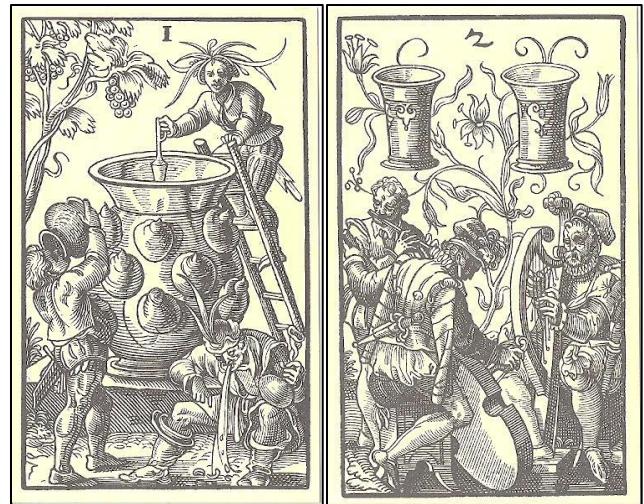
The structure of the deck is a just a little odd. I get the impression that the artist could not quite make up his mind as to whether the deck should be German or Spanish. The pip cards are numbered from 1(ace) to 9 in Arabic numerals. The tenth card in each suit is numbered with the Roman numeral X and each one pictures a full length female figure. The following three cards in each suit are the German courts Unter, Ober and a Koinig. The Koinigs are all mounted on horses. In Spanish decks, the pip cards are also numbered 1 to 9 with the tenth card being a Sota (page), followed by a mounted Cavalier and a Rey (king). There are no Queens in either the Spanish or traditional German decks yet Jost Amman, possibly as a gesture to the French and Italian decks that did include Queens, felt the need to include a Queenly looking, unnamed card in each suit but he consigned to her the Roman numeral X. He also seemed to like the idea of the Spanish mounted Cavaliers, so he likewise mounted his Koenig's.

The engravings throughout the deck are truly magnificent. Each pip card has wonderful vignettes and the way that the suit symbols are distributed on each card is very appealing. Each card has so much graphic work and yet there is no sense of clutter. One could spend hours taking in all the de-

tails. I am showing just nine cards which I feel are a fair representation of this fabulous deck and, once again, I must make the point that it is facsimiles such as this that allow us to see and appreciate not only the workmanship involved but also to gain a glimpse into the fashions and daily activities of the time.

Some of the cards in the suit of Wine Pots appear to suggest over indulgence in drinking. For instance, on the 1(ace) of Wine Pots, one of the characters has obviously had too much to drink while the 3 of the same suit shows a couple pretty much on their way to the same condition. I should have thought that such scenes would be more appropriate to the suit of Drinking Cups because there is an old expression that describes one who has had too much to drink as "being in his cups". The 2 of Drinking Cups pictures a musical trio playing cello, harp and flute and as serene as it looks, note the dagger behind the back of the cellist! The 7 of Books features another musical scene with a lady playing the pipe organ which, in those days, apparently required the aid of another person to operate the bellows that forced air through the pipes to produce the sounds. Later on, of course, the pipe organs were designed with bellows that were operated by foot pedals under control of the performer. The 3 of Printer's Pads is very quaint, showing a couple who are, I believe, playing cards by candle light. The scene suggests the origin of another old expression that was used whenever one sensed that an undertaking was not worth the effort. In the case of a game, the expression is "the game is not worth the candle" meaning that the cost of the candle needed for the light by which to play, was not worth the outcome of the game. The expression is still heard occasionally today whenever any endeavor does not appear to be worth the effort necessary to achieve a certain outcome. The 8 of Printer's Pads shows a woman buying some wares while a thief is behind her, cutting away her purse.

Space will not allow the in-depth review that this deck deserves, however, I highly recommend a visit to www.books.google.com where the book, *Researches into the History of Playing Cards* can be searched and read. It includes certain passages running from page 180 to 198 that give a detailed description of many of the cards, some of which are pictured. The book was written in 1816 by Samuel Weller Singer and as of February 7, 2012, Amazon has a soft cover edition selling for \$23.00. As of this writing, a book dealer in England is offering the original, leather bound book on the internet for \$5,700.00!



Rod sent me the following shortly after he sent me this article. As usual he was not content to let "sleeping dogs lie" but is continuing to do more of his thorough investigating which continues to add to our knowledge of playing cards.

"Well, it seems that I cannot avoid finding "mysteries". While going through the Jost Amman deck to choose cards for this article, I paid particular attention the four cards numbered with the Roman numeral X and made the choice of one of them. Immediately after sending the article and scans to you, I proceeded to put the deck back into its box when I noticed that the display card on the box was a better choice and I wondered how I came to miss it. Lo and Behold! This card is not in the deck and you will also notice that it does not have the Roman numeral or actually any number on it. Believe me, I went through the deck time and time again to make sure that the card was not included and why would it be, without the Roman X?"

Now that opens up a can of worms, does it not? Where does that odd card come from? It is clearly of the same style as the rest of the cards, particularly those with the Roman numeral X."

Now I am searching the Internet hoping to find the answer."

Subsequently Rod sent the following information found on the internet

"I was able to find that the facsimile deck was produced from the original owned by Osvaldo Menegazzi in Italy and that when he obtained the deck, it came with the odd card which is shown below)".



Editor's Note; Rod really exemplifies what a passionate collector is all about. He spends many hours studying the cards in his collection and rarely misses a trick when looking at each one. I am ashamed to say that as much as I love our playing cards (and I do) I do not have the time, patience or ability to do what he does.

It is the Gene Hochman's or Rod Starling's of this world who make it possible for us to learn and understand more about our amazing collectible and in Rod's case, to observe and appreciate the finer points such as the details in this beautifully engraved deck. We are very grateful for the time he spends studying the cards and even more grateful to him for sharing his findings with us through the pages of "Clear the Decks".

Thanks you so much Rod, I really look forward each issue to your latest articles. Please keep them coming as I have come to count on you for the unusual!

A Very Special Page

A number of years ago Tom and I found this wonderful small engraving which was a page from a 1698 book titled *Jeu de Geographie* and published in Florence. There are 52 cards (pages) each featuring a different place and the Hearts are Europe - Diamonds, Africa - Clubs, America and Spades, Asia. This page shows a North American Native woman and features Nouvelle France which is now known as Quebec.

How could we resist such a delightful, beautifully engraved playing card item

