APACHE PLAYING CARDS

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Hernando Cortés, through the soldier adven-
turers who accompanied him, is probably re-
sponsible for first introducing playing cards as a
form of gambling to the natives of the Americas.
A most interesting result of this indiscrimination
occurred over three hundred years later when
Apache Indians in the Territory of Arizona
painted cards that contained the essential char-
acteristics of those same sixteenth century Span-
ish designs.

Several authors in past years have presumed
that the soldiers who accompanied Columbus
must have brought cards with them but no factual
basis has been given by these authors for hazard-
ously such a guess. Concerning Cortés, however,
a secondary source, Francisco López de Gómara,
says that in 1520 soon after the first Europeans
marched into Mexico City, “Muczema . . . de-
lighted much . . . to see our men play at Cartes
and Dice,” and a primary source, Bernal Díaz
del Castillo, writes that after the division of trib-
ute from Montezuma’s storerooms, “gambling
was now commenced to a great extent, after a
certain Pedro Valenciano had managed to manu-
facture playing cards from parchment which were
as well painted and as beautiful to the eye as
those manufactured in Spain.”

There is some evidence to indicate that cards
were printed in the New World before the end
of the sixteenth century. Preserved in the Archivo
General de Indias, Seville, there are designs
which were prepared in 1583 for cards to be
printed in Mexico City and one features a sup-
posed portrait of Montezuma and another that of
Querétaro. At the Exhange Museum in Mexico
City there is an old block for printing cards
which, because it has in the design the coat of
arms of the last Spanish viceroy of the sixteenth
century, is dated as about 1600.

How quickly the natives took up the Spanish
games, using the stylized European picture cards,
is not known. In fact, to date, no systematic
study of playing card history in Mexico has been
published. Perhaps because we lack the story of
the intervening years, it comes as a delightful
surprise suddenly to discover in our museums
Indian-made, hand-painted on skin (like those
of Pedro Valenciano), and recognizably
based on the old designs while still conforming
to the Spanish composition of the deck. These
Apache cards also manage in a most intriguing
manner Apache culture and the forces that
were working upon that culture in the latter
half of the nineteenth century.

To appreciate the Indian cards one must
examine the Spanish games and the Spanish deck
on which the Indians based their designs. Monte
or Spanish monte was the popular game of the
period. Occasionally in later years the same
notation is made in letters and diaries by soldiers
and other travelers to the New World. Monte is a faro-type
game and owes its fascination to Lady Luck. It is
very simple to learn and since the card on
which the bets lie is not in view, old, worn, even
multilated cards can be used. Stated simply, in
monte the player bets against the banker on the
suit of the card on the bottom of the deck which
lies face down on the table or ground. Since
American Indians had enjoyed many gambling
games long before the Spaniards arrived, it was
easy for them to adopt this new form of play
even though the meaning behind the symbolism
used in the designs was probably unknown.
According to the reports of many travelers, the
Indians became very skillful, not only in the
game, but in all forms of gambling which their
Spanish teachers practiced. Conquian is a rum-
my-type game requiring more skill with numbers
and a deck of cards in better condition, which
probably accounts for its lack of popularity.

The Spanish monte deck differs from the
modern bridge deck in three respects: the num-
er of cards, the suit symbols, and the figure on
one of the court cards. The monte deck consists of
forty cards divided into four suits (called
corazons, espadas, copas, and tréboles); each suit
has numeraless—one through seven; and three
card figures; one of which might suggest that it
responds to the jack, caballero (squire
on horseback), and rey (king). It should be un-
derstood that certain formalized designs had
become conventional before the cards ever traveled
to America; then it will be interesting to watch
the designs as they are adapted by the Indian
artists.

Apparenlty the Indians used printed cards of
either European, Mexican, or U.S. manufacture
until about the middle of the nineteenth century.
At least, all the Indian-made cards so far located
in collections are of the period from about 1860
to the end of the century. The author has gathered
information on fortv-five Indian-made
decks, or parts of decks, in twenty-one collec-
tions. (It is to be hoped that more will be
brought to her attention as a result of this ar-
ticle.) All except one of these decks are painted
on skin and based on the Spanish monte deck.
All except five decks were either collected from
Apache Indians or are attributed to them. (A descrip-
tion of the four Apache decks in the Souther-
case, Los Angeles, was published in that museum’s publication Monarkey for July-
September, 1961.)

The two decks now in the University
Museum are attributed to the Apache tribe. The
designs are painted on skin which has been cut to a
uniform size—6.0 x 8.5 cm. and 5.8 x 10.1 cm.,
or about the size of the usual bridge card of
today. The first deck (NA-5594) has thirty-nine
cards as the caballeros of swords is missing. It was
purchased from a dealer by the Museum in
1917 and nothing of its previous history is
known. The second deck (45-151279) is com-
plete and came from the collection of Charles H.
Stephens in 1954. Mr. Stephens, a Philadelphia
Illustrator, seems to have purchased the cards
from a dealer in 1919. All too incomplete is a
note made at the time of purchase—“Monte
cards, pack of forty pieces, secured from Cochine,
Chiricahua Apache chief, by a U.S. officer in
the latter part of 1872, in Arizona.” Cochine was
much beholden by his followers and in addi-
tion respected by the U.S. Army officers who
dealt with him. It would be very interesting to
know the circumstances under which the cards
changed hands. Both of the decks in the Museum
show signs of wear. In fact, the first deck mentioned has been so rubbed and smudged as to make photography of the designs difficult.

The use of skin instead of paper suggests some
several interesting questions for which we have
no certain answer. Although one might suppose
that paper may not have been available, the thought
also occurs that the more durable leather was
admirably suited to the nomadic life led by the
Apache who had refused to be confined to a
reservation. On examination it made quite clear
that the skin used in making the cards was
carefully tanned, probably by the rawhide proc-
cess, and carefully chosen to be of uniform thick-
ness and free of damaging blisters. For, even
today, the cards are stiff and unbroken along the
edges. Of course, a player used to the thin flexible
paper cards of today would find the leather cards
very hard to shuffle.

The skin used in making NA-5594 presents
another interesting subject for conjecture, for it
is reputed to be human skin. Two other Apache
decks also lay claim to this distinction. It would
be interesting to verify this claim but, so far,
it has not been checked by any bio-chemical or
histological test. Some seem to feel that it is
within the range of cultural possibility while
others feel that, since the Apache seldom scalped
or mutilated the bodies of their victims except when
moved by a personal, individual, revenge,
the claim is not within the range of probability
and is merely an attempt on the part of some
agent to stimulate a sale at a higher price.

Pigments for painting the cards were certainly
easily available. A well dressed Apache was
always carefully and precisely painted whether on
a social or military expedition. The pigments
could have been either native vegetable dyes or
commercial colors secured from traders. A mud-
dy blue and red were used in the painting of
NA-5594 while in the Stephens deck a muddy
mustard yellow, rust red, and black were se-
lected. In both cases the Indians were careful
workmen but without talent for design and,
probably, without much experience as draftsmen.
It would appear that in these two instances the
artists were more intent on making the necessary
adjuncts to the playing of a game than on artistic
expression.

The human figure as seen on the court cards
is reduced to a “box with a knob on top” as in the
king or rey in the Illustration (a). Though
discouraging when compared with the ex-
curiously decorated Spanish figures, the simplification becomes more understandable when a close comparison is made with the decks which are used for comparison in this article are from the
University Museum’s collection (16272).

They were purchased in Mexico and were manu-
factured by J. B. Donahue & Co., in Chicago
in 1870 or a little later. In the Spanish figure of the
rey (b), the robes mask the arms and legs and it is
roughly a rectangle with a knob at one end.

S P R I N G, 1962
Though in the Indian card the figure is stylized, the Indian artist did retain the line of the open robes. Looking now at the Spanish sota (c), we see that the arms and legs are plainly visible. The painter retains these features also in (d) and in deck NA-5594 (e). In fact, this convention holds true in all Apache decks and furnishes the easiest way of distinguishing between roy and sota.

The artist of NA-5594 seems to have made some attempt to decorate his figure cards. Notice (a), (f), and (h). Besides having patterns introduced into their clothing these figures have headaddresses. The reyes have "ears" and the caballeor and sota have "crowns." Traditionally the crown has been reserved for the king, the supreme ruler—the figure card with the highest value. Apparently the Indian did not carry over this symbol indicating value. The reason may be clear if moonte was the game played, for in it the king does not have a value different from any other card.

The caballero—a man on horseback (i)—was more in the Indian culture pattern than were the kings and pages with their court costumes. In this case the Apache had a traditional means of making an arms—mainly of mane, ears, and tail which are characteristic of a horse (h). Also in the Stephens deck there appear indications of contemporary white civilization such as a saddle with a pack roll behind the rider (i). From 1865 to 1886 both the U. S. and the Mexican governments had cavalry stations stationed in the area in an effort to stop Apache raids on settlements.

Though at first glance the court cards seem more interesting, the numeral cards are also revealing. Bound by tradition, it is sometimes difficult to identify individual cards. However, when once the whole deck is placed in order of sequence the transition from Spanish to Indian designs becomes more apparent. An amazing number of Spanish characteristics have been kept: for example, the ace of each suit is always the most elaborate, and often exaggerated, presentation of the suit. The alternate covered cup will appear on the ace, and a short-stem goblet throughout the rest of the suit (k), (l), and (m).

Though the Indian may have selected the preserve Spanish card to copy, he did not always seem to recognize the article he was attempting to represent. In the sword suit a single line suffices without any attempt at identifying line to mark the hilt (n), (o); again on the ace, the belt, which the Spanish ace shows (p) is not convincing on the Indian card (q) though the crossed lines indicate the Spanish source of the design. The Spanish ace of clubs is often very curious—bulbous, with stubs of cut branches bristling with green leaves (r). In this case the Indian simplification is a relief (s). It should be remarked that among the stylized Spanish designs there was some latitude and the exaggeration is not always as marked as in this case.

The suit of coins should have presented no problem to the Indian artist. Silver money and possibly gold coins must have been familiar to most Apache men who did a lively business stealing cattle and horses and then selling them to either Mexican or U. S. army storekeepers. However, the symbols on the aces (t), (v), have more the appearance of Indian "sums" while on the rest of the suit they lack the internal decoration that would distinguish them from dots (d).

It is interesting that Mr. Stewart Culin, the eminent ethnologist and Curator of the University Museum from 1895 to 1903, was the first scientist to publish any information, other than noting their existence, on Indian-made cards. While at the Museum Mr. Culin gathered together a very fine playing card collection though it was not until sixteen years later that the Museum acquired its first deck of Apache cards. Mr. Culin wrote the catalogue for the games, cards, and dice which were exhibited at the Cotton States and International Exposition, Atlanta, Georgia. This fine work, published in the Journal of the U. S. National Museum, 1896, exceeded a mere catalogue and contained an amazing amount of information that was new and significant in the field of games. Concerning the Apache cards which were exhibited, Mr. Culin reported on the playing card vocabulary that he had obtained from Captain John G. Bourke. Soldier and ethnologist, Capt. Bourke had spent more than twenty years fighting or working with Apache Indians in the Arizona Territory. Examination of the terms listed in the box shows an interesting mixture of parody Indian words and of a group obviously derived from the Spanish.

The action to shuffle (Spanish—barajar) is in Apache, ji-ko-shu-ace which Capt. Bourke translates as "I take or hurry the horse." The game conquen is known by the native name of dakoo-conquen meaning "cards—ten.

John Gregory Bourke was a careful observer and in his books on the Indian campaigns he gives some of the best descriptions of Apaches and their attitude toward cards. After picturing the establishment of evening camp in the Sierra with barbarous figures, and well worthy of a place in any museum"; and "The Apache scouts passed the time agreeably enough in gambling with the Chiricahus, whom they fleeced mercilessly, winning hundreds of dollars, in gold, silver, and paper at the games of monte, conquen . . ." At another time Bourke writes, "He (the Apache) travels with fewer 'impediments' than any other tribe of men in the world . . . but sometimes he allows himself the luxury or comfort of a pack of cards, imitated from those of the Mexicans, and made out of horse-hide . . .

Unfortunately, since the observations of Bourke and Culin nothing has been done to bring together any additional information on the subject. And yet conceivably—almost certainly—hidden in reports, diaries, and letters there are answers to such intriguing questions as: Were the Spanish rules for the games followed exactly or had the game been adapted? Were the playing card artists men, women, or both? What in the Apache culture or circumstances fostered the manufacture of cards only in the last half of the nineteenth century? Why should Apaches, who are not noted for either artistic expression or variety of handicrafts, produce most of the known decks of Indian-made cards now in our museums?