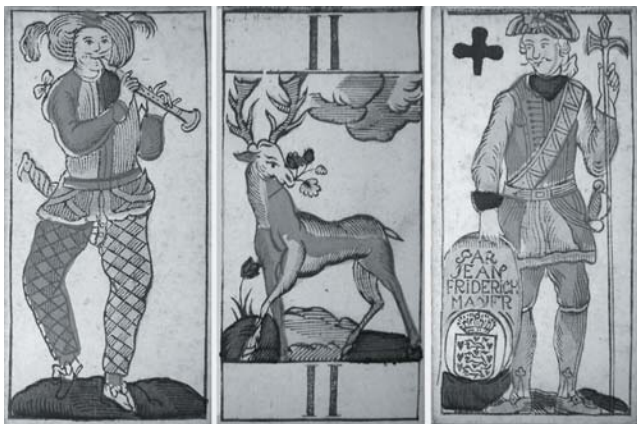


K. FRANK JENSEN

French suited tarot packs in Denmark and the Jacob Holmblad Animal tarot

Tarot decks with french suitmarks (or “tarok”, as they are called in Denmark) printed by Danish cardmakers, are very few. Only three different decks were manufactured up to 1837, all being animal tarots. The first came from Jean Friedrich Mayer’s workshop in Borregade 86 (now Borgergade) in central Copenhagen. J.F. Mayer is assumed to be an immigrant cardmaker, maybe from Flanderen, he obtained a royal privilege to print playing cards in Denmark in 1752, a privilege which in November 1756 was supported by a law forbidding import of playing card decks from abroad; an embargo which was kept until 1847. Only few decks from Mayer’s production have survived: a few of his whist decks and some examples of his animal tarot deck, the latter kept in the Danish National Museum.



Animal tarot by Jean Friedrich Mayer,
card maker in Copenhagen 1752 - 1783

Mayer’s animal tarot images came from the same tradition as several other animal



Animal tarot by Süss & Kuntze, card makers in Copenhagen
1790 - 1798

tarot decks, which in the middle of the 18th century showed up in Germany and Belgium (by van den Borre and Daveluy, for example). Mayer may very well have brought the woodblocks with him from abroad.

The second Danish animal tarot came from the workshop of C. E. Süss & Kuntze. Mayer’s

royal privilege and workshop in Borregade was taken over by Christoffer Ernst Süss in 1783. Tarot decks are not known from his production, but when Süss entered into companionship with Kuntze in 1790, another animal tarot deck saw the light of the day. The images were still taken from the European tradition, but this time with images like we find them by Andreas Göbl in München. Süss & Kuntze were in business until 1798.

With Jacob Holmblad's (1820-1837) tarot deck we had for the first time an animal tarot with unique illustrations with no resemblance to any other European tarot decks. Playing card manufacturer Jacob Holmblad was the third generation of a family of craftsmen who immigrated to Denmark from Sweden. His grandfather (also named Jacob Holmblad, b.1736), settled down as a dyer in Copenhagen, establishing his own workshop. His son again, Lauritz (b.1770), grew up to become an effective businessman, expanding his father's enterprises. In 1804 he bought an already existing soap factory located in a larger house at the corner of Gothersgade and Store Regnegade in central Copenhagen, a factory, whose line of products he soon enlarged by manufacturing oil-based paints and mustard.



Jacob Holmblad 1791 - 1837

The Holmblad residence in Gothersgade/Store Regnegade in central Copenhagen was not only the home of the several members of the Holmblad family but held also the localities where a major part of the business activities took place. The ground level at Store Regnegade (left side on the illustration) is where the production of soap took place, while soap, oil paints and mustard were sold in small retail shops at the Gothersgade (right) side of the building. In this very building Jacob Holmblad, the



The Holmblad Residence (later illustration: 1887)

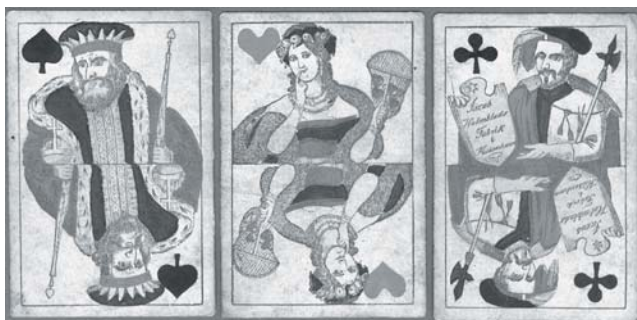
coming playing card manufacturer, was born in 1791. As a young man he was an apprentice in the soap manufacturing, but soon took interest in the Holmblad family's other business enterprises.

On September the 30th 1820, Jacob Holmblad obtained his royal privilege to manufacture playing cards. A second

privilege had been issued back in 1790 to Jan Valentin Dressler (1790 -1797); this privilege was taken over by Pierre Steinmann in 1798 and now by Jacob Holmblad. The embargo against import was still valid and a necessity to make card manufacturing profitable in a small country like Denmark.

The third and fourth floors of the building were now converted to accommodate the playing card factory with its manifold of processes: gluing together the layers of paper, drying, pressing, colouring, trimming and collating. The heavy printing presses and the machinery for surface treatment were placed under the roof (one can wonder how they got them up there?). Most of the materials were already in-house: the glue, the colours, the soap for the surface treatment. Only the paper had to be bought.

Jacob Holmblad did not grow up with playing cards as he did with the Holmblad family's other enter-prises. Playing card production was an entirely new experience for the 29 year old factory owner and the earliest cards from Jacob Holmblad's period are simple stencil-coloured woodcut prints. Over the 17 years Jacob Holmblad was in charge of the playing card production



Jacob Holmblad, early period (1820's)



Jacob Holmblad, later period (c. 1830)

he, however, developed considerable workmanship (see illustration) and the Holmblad playing cards became a success. In 1831, for example, the playing card factory had 14 employees plus a varying number of extra hands and produced 55.000 decks of cards. If we take 1831 as an average for the whole period of 17 years, more than one million decks of cards were printed under Jacob Holmblad's auspices.

Over the years, Jacob Holmblad became a member of the Copenhagen city council and was enobled. When he died of typhoid fever in 1837 the card factory was taken over by his son, Lauritz Peter Holmblad.

In "Adresseavisen" (a periodical with news and advertisements) for Saturday, December 20th, 1823 Jacob Holmblad advertises various playing cards for sale in the Gothersgade building, including "extra fine kobberstukne Tarokkort" at a cost of 9

mark per deck. The same can be bought in “fine” quality for a price of 6 mark. A third variant is called “stemplede tarokkort” at 4 mark a deck. The first two are listed as having been printed by copper plate. The two qualities could, for example, have differences in paper quality and/or surface treatment. Whatever “stemplede” (stamped) however means, they were obviously inferior to the other two qualities. Having pondered over the term “stamped cards”: could there possibly be a cheap and simple way to make cards, I had never heard about before? No, I think it is simpler than that, but I am not sure. Among the material I acquired with the remains of the Holmblad archive was a box with rubber and metal stamps. Among them also a few small stamps with texts like “secunda”, and “udskud”; the latter perhaps best translated as “screened out”. They were used to stamp cards with which something went wrong during the production process, but they were sold anyway. I remember having seen a few single cards where the stencil colouring was smudged, carrying such a stamp.



Jacob Holmblad Animal Tarot.

Left: copperplate version. Right: lithographic version.

I happen to have two copies of Jacob Holmblad’s animal tarot. They are different in many ways, even though they essentially are alike. They could have been the two qualities of copper plate prints as advertised, but to me it looks like the obviously latest of them is printed by lithography. I also know, from experience, that it takes an expert to decide which printing methods are used for a given specimen. Anyway, the same plates were not used for the two decks; there are too many minor differences for that, and in particular the latest deck has many more details in the line drawings. If I am right, this means that L.P. Holmblad probably around 1830 changed to lithographic presses and that the later versions of the animal tarot deck were lithographic prints. Copper plates are also known lasting for a very limited number of prints only before the print quality

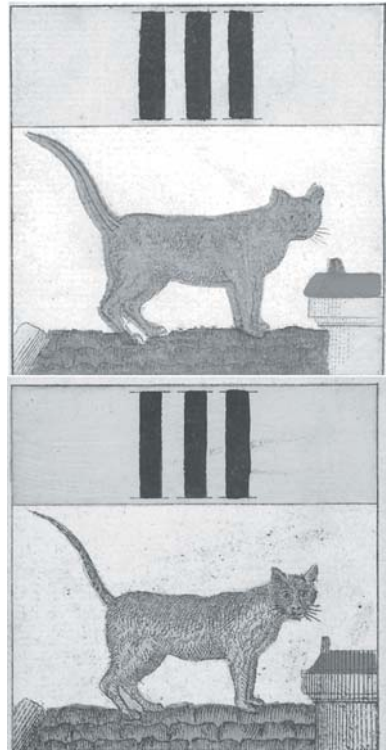


Royal privilege stamp

declines. The stamps on the ace of hearts, indicating that the item comes from a maker with a privilege, are also different: The oldest stamps were larger than the stamp used later.

The illustrator of Holmblad's animal tarot is not known; the images are not direct redrawings of foreign packs but rather illustrations of animals, as we find them in Danish school books of the time. Most are domestic animals or part of the Danish fauna: cat, horse, cock, bull, dog, stag, eagle, ram, swan, pig, hare and owl. The foreign animals are: elephant, lion, tiger, camel, ape, zebra, bear and parrot. All animals that could be seen in a circus or at the fairground, except the elephant, which was more unusual and for which resemblance with the proper animal the illustrator certainly had problems with. The cat on the roof can be found again in Jacob Holmblad's Gnav (cuccu) pack.

Both decks are stencil-coloured; the copper plate version rather unprecisely and in many cases the colour covers the fragile black lines of the copper print. A touch of hand colouring shows up here and there, for example when the copper plate tiger shows his red tongue and presumably also when it comes to skin tones.

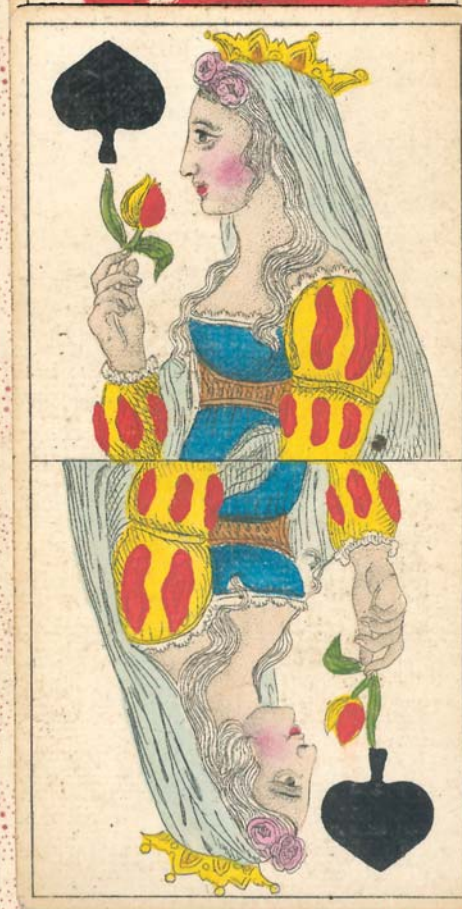


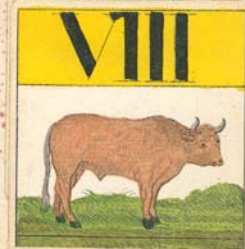
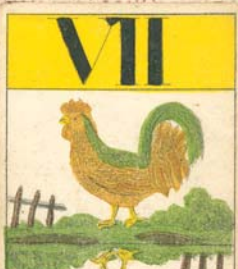
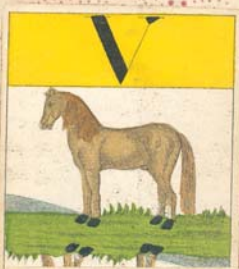
Jacob Holmblad Animal Tarot.
Upper: copperplate;
below: lithography

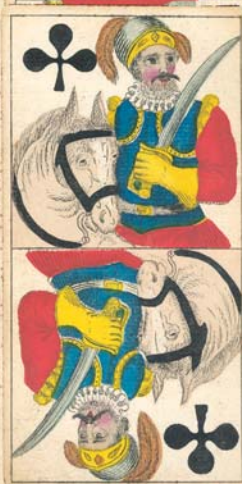


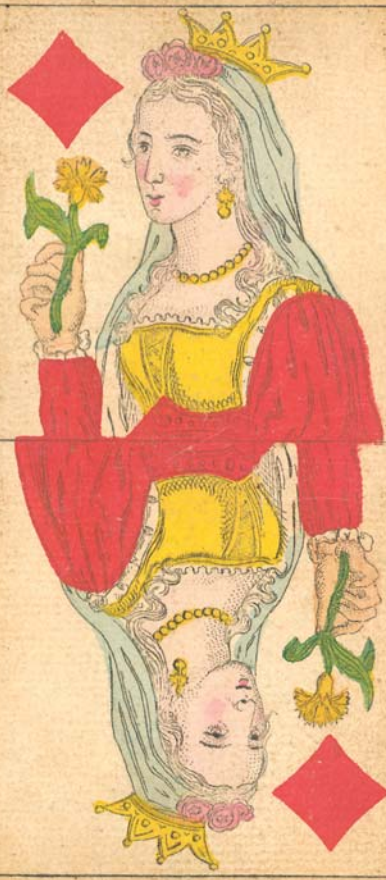
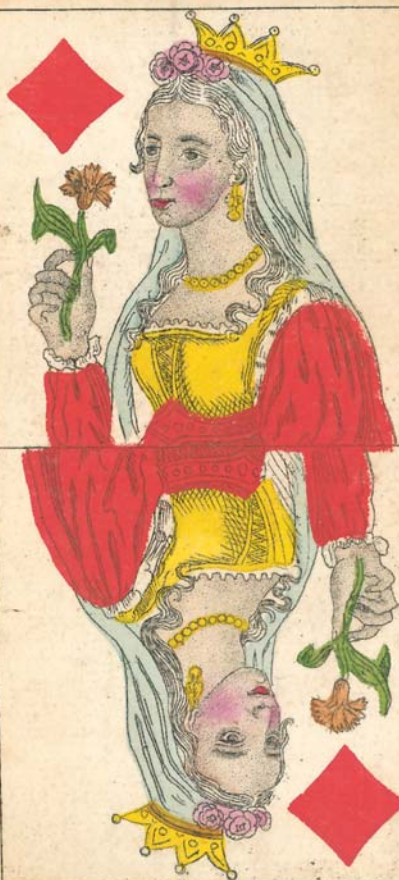
L.P. Holmblad tarot c. 1850,
Trump II = the Holmblad residence in Gothersgade

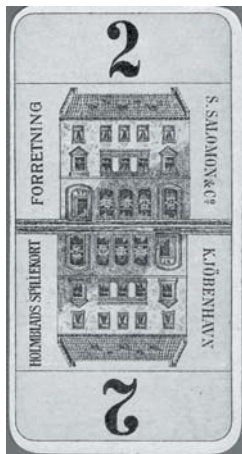
Jacob Holmblad's animal tarot was the last french-suited animal tarot produced in Denmark. When the playing card factory was taken over after his death in 1837 by his son Lauritz Peter Holmblad the animal images were substituted by a tarot deck with buildings from Copenhagen and surroundings











Holmblad/Salomon
c. 1920, retail shop at
Amagertorv

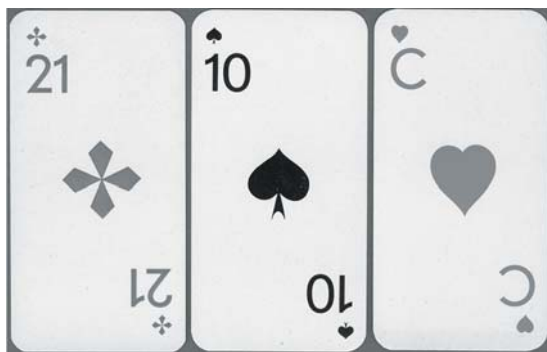
depicted on the trumps. This deck came in several editions, where each new edition reflected the changes that had happened to the buildings, since the last edition. The second half of the 19th century was a period where hectic building activities took place. This tarot pack was continued when S. Salomon took over Holmblad's playing card company at the end of the century, still with a couple of images changed – for example, the picture of Holmblad's residence in Gothersgade was replaced by an illustration depicting the playing card retail shop now established by S. Salomon at Amagertorv, still in central Copenhagen. The decks were now printed abroad in an inferior quality. What a decline! When Tage Aastrup in 1939 took over "Holmblads Spillekortforretning - S. Salomon & Co" as it was called now, the tarot deck was no longer produced.

It should take years before one more, the definitely last French-suited tarot deck, was published in Denmark. During WW2, the rather few Danish tarok players could not buy imported decks from, for example, Piatnik in Austria as they used to do, so one of them, I.V.V. Hermansen, a military man, designed in 1944 a very simple and cheaply produced deck with no illustrations and only green, red and black printing ink used, for the benefit of the players. That may be the most boring tarot pack in the world, but it served its purpose.

Tarok is still played in Denmark but the players are few. Traditionally they came from the higher middle class and a great part of the members of the surviving tarok clubs are still ranked military personel, doctors, lawyers, school teachers, accountants...

Notes:

- Illustrations of the Holmblad deck are from the lithographic version except where comparisons are made.
- The illustrations from Mayer's and Süsz & Kuntze's animal tarok were taken at the Danish Nationalmuseum by H.J. Hinrup. All other illustrations are from the author's collection.
- The Mayer Animal tarot was reproduced in 1978 by Hagen & Sørensen, Odense. The pack is still available from the author for EUR 20.-, postage included.



J.V.V. Hermansen (Emil Jensen Ejka 1944)

Opposite page: left – lithographic version; right – copperplate version