

CONTROL ON PLAYING CARDS IN FLORENCE AROUND 1880

by Franco Pratesi – 19.09.2013

INTRODUCTION

The historical development of production and trade of playing cards in Florence is rich of documents, which however have been kept in a very irregular way. In particular, it may be more difficult to find records after the formation of the Italian Kingdom than earlier on.

A folder in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, ASF, has some information for the years around 1880, which is worth of a careful examination, even though it does not provide a complete view of the situation.

As a matter of fact, what is available in this case is not a systematic register with quantitative data – we have instead several documents on the most varied questions. Therefore, we obtain information that can provide an insight into the production and trade of playing cards, but only on the basis of several specific cases.

The archive group and the relevant section

The ASF is better known for its precious collections of the Medici times. However, also archive groups can be found there coming from times later than the Grand Duchy, already belonging to the Italian Kingdom. We are interested in the section “Intendenza di finanza”, or tax office. It is a rich collection, which however only covers times up to 1894. Unfortunately, the similar documentation of the following years can be considered as completely destroyed.

It appears as an unbelievable result that I could find one and only one folder with documents on playing cards amongst the 2689 items of this section. Fact is that the whole section is still hardly accessible and only described in a concise inventory of the time.

In conclusion, what I can report below only derives from folder No. 110, and from a minor part of it. This is, of course, too small a fraction to allow a systematic study. Nevertheless, I have decided that it may be significant to get a look on the local situation at this time.

In order to better define what we are interested in, let us see how these documents were originally ordered. There was a long chain of labels for cataloguing the documents, as follows: Filza / Compartimento / Titolo / Categoria / Fascicolo. The first number, of the folder, was just its identification number, in running order, in our case it is: ASF, Intendenza di finanza, 110. The following labels for the documents will be indicated individually, as soon as they are discussed below.

The general historical context

The time interval under examination is of a few years around 1880. In order to appreciate the bureaucratic situation, let us remind what had happened in Florence in the previous years.

As soon as the Italian Kingdom was established in 1861 in Turin, Florence was no longer the capital of an independent state. Earlier on, how much independent could have been the government of Tuscany, under the Lorraine-Hapsburg House, is a typical subject for scholar discussions. (Briefly, some suggestions could have arrived from Vienna, but there was no evident dependence.)

In the Italian Kingdom, Tuscany became one of the many regions, and Florence one of the many important towns, still looked for by visitors for its artistic heritage. Most members of the local high-class were landowners, hardly interested in establishing new activities in the field of industry or trade. Several entrepreneurs did exist, but they mostly came from abroad.

We have to deal with bureaucracy, and even from this point of view the formation of the Kingdom corresponded to a centralisation in Turin of the main offices of the administration, for the whole country.

Then there were several years, 1865-1870, in which Florence itself became the capital of Italy. This involved the relocation of several offices in Florence, in addition to royal palace, parliament and departments. Not surprisingly, the civil servants, who worked in Turin in the state administration, strongly protested against the move.

The change of Florence into the capital of Italy brought new and big city plans and architectonic innovations that have left visible traces – such as Piazzale Michelangelo or the “modern” part of the town centre.

In the years we are interested in, however, this situation had changed again, because in the meantime the capital of Italy had become Rome, at last conquered from the Pope. Its unique historic heritage and its central position in Italy certainly were acknowledged reasons for the additional move.

The bureaucratic situation

We have seen that the general situation of Florence had suffered several great changes before the time we are interested in. Even greater changes had occurred in the administration and especially in the Ufficio del Bollo, as was active in the Grand Duchy.

Of course, even earlier on the stamp office was not independent and worked under the control of the minister of finance, whichever his title and name could be. Now, however, the situation was really complex, because the office in Florence was just a section of the state administration.

The problem is that the minister of finance was now located in Rome, the capital of the country. It is thus not surprising to find official letters frequently exchanged between the two towns, with obviously Florence playing a subordinate part.

There was moreover another fact to remarkably complicate the situation: the Ufficio del Bollo of Italy was established in Turin at the beginning of the Italian Kingdom. Then, clearly, the Florentine office became one of the many local sections under the Turin control.

When the capital town became Florence, and then Rome, this particular office remained in Turin, and there has remained in the years of the Italian Republic too. This explains why the official correspondence under examination was cross-exchanged between Turin, Rome, and Florence, in both directions, but always with Florence in a minor position. (A couple of telegrams kept among these documents may remind us that the playing cards in question cannot be very old.)

By the way, the situation mentioned can explain the unexpected fact that research on the history of playing cards produced and used in Tuscany at the time is more difficult than for centuries earlier on.

Already decades ago, I searched in the possible archives in Florence and Turin with the common answer that those documents had been totally destroyed. In Florence, due to the floods of 1966, in Turin owing to something of the same kind – maybe with fire in the place of water. I will give some clue for optimism, nevertheless: something may have escaped my search, and in Rome I never looked for this kind of information.

In conclusion, there is no reason to complain that the time interval is here too short; on the contrary, we must be satisfied to find some new insight into the Florentine situation at the time.

The folder under examination

The part of folder No. 110, which we are interested in, is the last one, less than one half of the documents; the main part does not involve playing cards, but rather official stamped paper, its production and control.

In the mentioned chain: Compartimento / Titolo / Categoria / Fascicolo, we have in our case 2 / XV / 6 to 8 / No, respectively. I will not repeat below 2 / XV / for every document, but will just insert in square brackets the two last numbers, corresponding to Categoria, 6 to 8, and Fascicolo, its number, in running order.

There is a lot of communications among the different offices involved. This is maybe the most evident difference with respect to previous times. The documents mainly deal with fines for violation of the laws on the tax stamps on playing cards.

For a single case, we usually have a file with several letters and notes, sometimes with additional petitions in order to have the fine remitted or at least reduced. It is easy to understand these petitions, because a standard way for applying a reduced fine, documented more than once, was to decrease it from L.100 down to L.10.

The manufacture of playing cards

The increase of bureaucratic requirements has for us the merit to provide some interesting new information, even on the working system used in the production of playing cards. As it could be expected for the previous centuries, the job was still far from a modern industrial technique. To begin with, no real factories were still functioning for this production in Florence.

The corresponding workshops were either ancillary rooms in a shop, or directly at home of the cardmaker. Moreover, a part of the job had the character of a cottage industry, with some manufacturing subcontracted to workers active in their own residence.

Now, it is easy to understand that if this was the typical situation in the 1880s, this corresponded to a well-established tradition of a house-to-house job, functioning in the same way since several centuries. If there is something surprising, it may be that they had not introduced as late as the 1880s some “modern” factory, but evidently the market was not wide enough.

I am not able to get along without thinking here of the once traditional production of the Florentine straw hats, which involved many house-to-house transfers before reaching the final product. Even the renowned earlier productions of Florentine wool and silk-wares included several jobs of this kind.

The three Florentine cardmakers

From the documents in the folder under examination, contained in the first file, we obtain a clear view of the card production in Florence, especially in the first months of 1880. [6/1] Not only we see which were the three workshops active in the field, but also get some new information on the production methods.

The three active cardmakers were: 1. Dario BROGI, 2. Attilio BARAGIOLI, 3. Luigi ADAMI. It may be surprising to find Baragioli and Adami indicated after Brogi, because they belonged to renowned families of Florentine cardmakers, whereas Brogi was apparently a newcomer.

Fact is that Brogi was the successor to the late Ferdinando CHIARI, who in his turn had followed previous cardmakers active in the workshop in the same Via della Condotta, where, for instance, Giovanni PISTOJ had led a group of cardmakers in the 1810s.

This workshop was the oldest and had been active more continuously than the others. It was essentially a stationery shop and at the time was equipped with a typography as well. Therefore, for Brogi, it was enough that he indicated the address of this shop for identifying head and place of production.

For the two remaining cardmakers, some further information was required from the office. Attilio Baragioli gave no less than three addresses for his job: his workshop in Via dell'Arcivescovado 3, where the core manufacturing was performed; the address in Via dei Rustici 4, ultimo piano, of Rachele Benini, who acted as a painter for Carte fini; his home address, in Piazza del Duomo 4, mezzanino a destra, where the packs were arranged and wrapped.

Luigi Adami worked apparently at home, or in an apartment used as workshop, in Via Altafronte 14, piano primo. The address of his painter was in Via Pietrapiana 18, secondo piano, and after some correspondence we also learn his name as Giuseppe Gianibani.

The profession of the two painters mentioned is significantly indicated as Miniatore, even if their products were evidently very different from the ancient miniatures.

Card packs produced in 1878

In the same file, we find a letter of 25 November 1878 with attached a long list of the packs stamped by the three Florentine cardmakers from 1 January to 19 November of that year. The list is reproduced in the following section, with the dates and the individual quantities of packs brought to the stamping office.

In the same list, the corresponding total amounts are also provided, as follows:

Ferdinando CHIARI	15931
Attilio BARAGIOLI	10289
Luigi ADAMI	3000
TOTAL	29220

If we consider that the yearly production was similarly fractioned in the various months – which is not an exact theory – we might deduce for 1878 in Florence about 33000 packs as the total yearly production of cards stamped. This value corresponds to less than one half of the production of half century before, and to about one third of that recorded for the last years of the Grand Duchy.

List of packs stamped in 1878 in Florence (1 January – 19 November)

I feel that somebody may study further the quantitative information provided in the document and have thus copied it entirely in the following table; from this it is possible to deduce some indications on the working methods and their planning.

CHIARI			BARAGIOLI			ADAMI		
W	MMDD	PACKS	W	MMDD	PACKS	W	MMDD	PACKS
4	0102	144	5	0103	240	3	0108	100
7	0105	192	2	0107	240	3	0115	350
5	0110	476	6	0111	240	7	0126	150
7	0119	384	7	0112	240	5	0214	200
2	0128	360	5	0117	240	2	0304	200
4	0206	276	5	0124	240	5	0321	200
7	0216	300	7	0126	240	4	0501	200
5	0221	360	4	0130	240	7	0511	150
3	0226	469	6	0201	240	3	0528	100
6	0308	516	7	0209	240	5	0627	150
5	0314	410	3	0212	240	4	0703	300
5	0321	360	2	0218	240	2	0909	200
6	0329	300	2	0225	300	5	0919	200
4	0403	360	5	0307	240	2	1014	200
4	0410	420	5	0321	240	3	1119	300
4	0417	360	6	0322	120			
5	0425	384	7	0323	240		TOTAL	3000
6	0503	408	4	0327	240			
5	0509	360	5	0328	120			
6	0517	360	6	0329	240			
6	0524	372	7	0413	240			
6	0531	408	7	0420	300	W	Day	
4	0605	354	2	0422	120	1	Monday	

4	0612	528	2	0429	46	2	Tuesday	
3	0618	420	2	0506	31	3	Wednesday	
6	0705	660	5	0509	240	4	Thursday	
6	0712	414	6	0517	120	5	Friday	
6	0719	360	6	0607	240	6	Saturday	
6	0726	444	3	0625	240	7	Sunday	
5	0801	408	7	0713	240			
6	0809	348	5	0718	240			
6	0823	648	7	0810	240			
6	0830	360	6	0823	240			
6	0906	432	6	0830	24			
6	0913	408	5	0912	240			
4	0918	72	5	0926	240			
6	0927	648	5	1010	300			
6	1011	416	5	1010	120			
7	1019	384	3	1015	240			
6	1026	348	5	1017	120			
7	1102	300	4	1023	240			
			6	1025	240			
	TOTAL	15931	4	1030	240			
			5	1031	120			
			7	1102	120			
			5	1107	408			
			7	1109	120			
			7	1116	240			
			3	1119	120			
				TOTAL	10289			

I have added the three initial columns just out of curiosity. I was wondering, which were the days of the week preferred by cardmakers and employees. I was thinking of Friday as the most probable day. If one had asked me which day was not present in the list, I had answered Sunday of course. If the perpetual calendar that I have used is correct, there is something surprising in this question: the fixed day off is here Monday, as if it were some barbers to stamp the cards.

Now, I am not able to imagine our cardmaker coming into the office to stamp his packs on Sunday, and prefer to forward this puzzle to any reader interested in solving it. (Meantime I take it, as if my numbers were by one unit lower.)

There is something else that was hard to expect, for instance the different batches of packs used by the three cardmakers. Not surprisingly, Baragioli worked keeping the usual dozens of packs as units for his job. Chiari could arrive at the office with much more packs, and was not so dependent on the dozens. Adami on his part clearly worked with fifty packs as his preferred unit for processing.

Kinds of cards

We are used to find six kinds of common playing cards produced in Florence in the past: 32- 40- and 52-card packs in both Piccole and Grandi versions, and Minchiate as the seventh kind. Sometimes the kinds of ordinary cards produced were less, but Minchiate were always present to occupy the last column of the registers.

Now, we only find the record of packs, with no information of their kinds. Just one line of text mentions 40- and 97-card packs. It is not however a line whatsoever; it belongs to the title of the

long list of the previous chapter: “Stato del numero dei mazzi di carte da giuoco del 40 e 97 sottoposti alla formalità del Bollo dei Fabbricanti in Firenze da 1 di Gennaio al 19 Novembre 1878”.

This title gives us a precious information with two consequences: the first is that ordinary cards were only produced in the 40-card version. This excludes that they could be used for games of foreign provenance, to begin with Whist.

Even if ordinary cards were only produced in the 40-card format, it is somewhat surprising that they are not mentioned in the two “usual” forms of Piccole and Grandi. These had been present for a long time, and kept their tradition even later on. In the 20th century, either produced in Florence or in other Italian towns, two formats continued to be made with the same pattern, now under the name of Fiorentina for the Grandi, and Toscane for the Piccole.

It cannot be excluded that both types were used at the time under examination here, but were just not distinguished in the records – because there was no difference in the corresponding tax stamps.

Probably still more important is the second consequence: the mention in the same document of 97-card packs. They obviously corresponded to the typical Florentine Minchiate. It is known that production, trade, and utilisation of these cards had an important tradition in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, but at the same time it is clear that in the whole “new” Italian Kingdom their presence was hardly perceptible.

That Minchiate were still produced in Florence could be expected, but if we had found that in 1878 they were no longer produced and used at all that finding could not be surprising either. Only for Genoa, we have witness that Solesio produced them still in the 20th century.

Small-size cards

As mentioned above, we never find indicated here the usual distinction between Grandi and Piccole cards. Nevertheless, there is a kind of cards of reduced dimensions that more than once appear as a controversial subject.

At the time, packs of mini-cards were already traded as toys, just for keeping children amused. These were too small to be used for common card playing and were thus traded without any commitment to be stamped. No information is thus available on their quantity and provenance.

There were however evidently some intermediate cases of cards, which one could maintain to be too small to receive the usual stamps, but at the same time were big enough to play with. This uncertainty originated several discussions between traders and offices, and moreover between different offices themselves. Unfortunately, all the correspondence between the offices is now kept without the card specimens that were forwarded together for a decision by the responsible authorities.

As one could expect, if a given kind of packs was once fined, the bureaucracy required that the same treatment continued unchanged in similar cases. On the contrary, however, once one trader had obtained the permission to sell a given pack of cards unstamped, other sellers could then ask for doing the same.

This actually happened, with card specimens travelling from an office to another in order to find a correct behaviour for their trade. In a few particular cases, we are informed of the provenance of these cards: be it an expected place or not – they came from Switzerland. [6/125]

It appears that some office was not indifferent to the question. At least in one case the cards are forwarded for an advice from the supervisors, because they had been considered as to be necessarily stamped, but were so small that there was not free space enough on the ace of hearts to print the stamp. The suggestion ultimately was to use the six of hearts instead of the ace. [6/108]

Stamping and re-stamping

The control on the whole trade of playing cards was still based on the permission to sell them, only given to authorised shops; moreover, playing cards could only be sold and used on condition

that they had been duly stamped at the stamp office. Any cardmaker had to submit his products to the stamping operation before they could be traded.

It is obvious that there was a real interest in avoiding these extra costs, not only by the players but also beginning with the makers themselves. Therefore, frequent inspections were organised in the workshops to check that the makers produced cards following the detailed regulations on the matter.

When a regularly stamped pack was ultimately on sale, sometimes it was possible that it had to be stamped again, because in the meantime the official stamp had changed. This apparently occurred rather frequently.

It seems that the administration was operating severely in order to avoid the frequent illegal trades of playing cards at the time. We read of new stamps rather frequently introduced; special information is provided on the new stamps of 1883, with specified 30 Cent, 50 Cent, or Estero. [6/143]

When a new stamp was introduced, the old one completely lost its validity and these packs were considered as unstamped, unless they were re-stamped with the new stamp. The re-stamping operation was free of charge, but was necessary for any subsequent trade or utilisation.

We can thus find in the documents the case of the owner of a shop in the central Via Tornabuoni, Edoardo Goodban, who brought to the office his 124 packs to be re-stamped with the result that part of them were simply re-stamped free of charge, as he did expect, but no less than 46 or 47 packs were requisitioned with a fine to pay, because they did not have the last stamp, only the last but one. He could only apply for fine reduction, on the basis of his good faith. [7/265]

The importance of the aces of hearts

The most important card of all the packs was the ace of hearts. This was not because it had a special role in any card game, but just because it was the card chosen for printing the stamp on. Thus, from the office point of view, any card pack could be considered as formed by the ace of hearts and all the remaining cards.

There were detailed instructions how to deal with the new packs, and how to wrap them so that the stamp on the ace of hearts was visible within the envelope still unopened. Inspections in the workshops were rather frequent to control that they obeyed the regulations.

From reports of 1882 on such visits, [6/126] we learn that the situation of cardmakers had changed. Besides the three cardmakers already encountered, we find mentioned a fourth one active, Giuseppe AGRESTI, and also a newcomer, who was just beginning his job, Alessandro CONTI.

We find the importance of the aces of hearts even with the packs ready to be sold at the shops authorised. The question was connected with the wrapping of the pack: in some cases it was so manufactured that it allowed the ace of hearts to be pulled out of the wrapping and substituted with another card. In these cases, both the seller and the maker were fined.

We thus find Dario Ciottoli at Marradi fined together with Baragioli for 9 such packs, [7/256] and Assunta Fabbri again at Marradi and once more Baragioli, with 24 packs involved. [7/257]

Several other cases of violations are documented, involving selling cards without a valid authorisation, but particularly without valid stamps.

Forged stamps

It was also possible to forge stamps and customs officers had to check that they were valid. In one occasion, we read a letter coming directly from the Roman headquarters with precise indication of places where the forging was acquiring some popularity, thanks to “mezzi chimici” or chemical means.

Even two names of peddlers who should have been guilty for this were given, Gaetano Morgagni from Forlì and Guglielmo Alberoni from Lugo. Places in Romagna or near to it were often associated with smuggling and tax evasion.

The office in Florence was required to control that this illegal activity was interrupted and punished. The following careful inspections involved both tax guards and Carabinieri, but nothing was discovered. [7/322]

Rewards to the customs officers

It had been a common usage for centuries that the customs officers were rewarded with a fraction of the fines that they had contributed to inflict on any offender. It cannot be surprising to find this usage still in action at the time.

Nevertheless some cases may be unexpected. Just one example may be a letter that travelled through several offices in 1884. A custom officer, Alfonso Atti, has changed his job from Florence to Levanto. Four months before, he had contributed to fine two sellers, and had received no reward for his action. What is curious is the whole chain of command upwards in Liguria and downwards in Florence involved in adding stamps and signatures to his official request to be informed about the repercussions of the penalty. [7/255]

This is not the only case of queries on the topic, because the corresponding regulations were not clear-cut enough. Another case of 1883 involves the head of the guards asking for which law has to apply, and how it must be interpreted, in the sharing out of the parts of the fines, if they were due – with the implicit suggestion that they really were. [6/144]

Cardmakers with a royal emblem

This is not a very relevant affair, but may add some insight into the bureaucratic relations at the time, 1883. [8/210] We have already seen how complex they were between Turin, Florence, and Rome. In this case, we find another sector of the state administration involved, with the Questore, or police commissioner. Even if located in Florence, this had an authority directly coming from Rome, and seemingly considered the tax office at a lower degree in the bureaucracy.

What is curious is what and how the commissioner writes. He asks the tax office if there is any justification for the fact that workshops of cardmakers had positioned the emblem of the Italian Kingdom above their doors.

Then we find a second letter of the commissioner, written just six days after (and they were not emails) pressing for an answer to the letter previously sent. The answer soon compiled was that it was a violation, if the traders could not show a suitable authorisation to display the royal emblem.

CONCLUSION

New information has been reported, useful for outlining the history of playing cards in Tuscany in a few years around 1880, including the amount of packs produced by the three cardmakers active in Florence at the time. In particular, we are informed that Minchiate were still produced by then.

An insight has been obtained on the functioning of the offices, including control on card production and trade, with corresponding reports exchanged between the Florentine administration and the headmasters' offices in Turin and Rome.

The time interval is small, and relatively recent. However, strangely enough, it is harder to find documents on the subject for these and the following years, than for a whole century earlier on. In principle, suitable documents for this time can be found in the archives of Turin and Rome, in addition to Florence, but they have still to be discovered.