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### **Researches into the History of Playing Cards**

The literary scholar Samuel Weller Singer (1783–1858) was largely self-taught, but his enthusiasm for reading caused him to open a bookshop, and he developed a wide circle of bibliomaniac friends, including Francis Douce (who later left him enough money to retire from writing for a living). He was an editor of many early modern poets, and his editions of John Selden's *Table-Talk* and Joseph Spence's *Anecdotes, Observations, and Characters, of Books and Men* are also reissued in this series. This highly illustrated 1816 work, originally published in a run of only 250 copies, was praised for its quality by Thomas Frognall Dibdin. In it, Singer argues that the increasing sophistication sought by the buyers of playing cards led to increasing improvements in the art of wood engraving, and that the study of these humble and rarely surviving artefacts can give insights into the achievements of the greatest Renaissance carvers.

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# Researches into the History of Playing Cards

*With Illustrations of the Origin of Printing  
and Engraving on Wood*

SAMUEL WELLER SINGER

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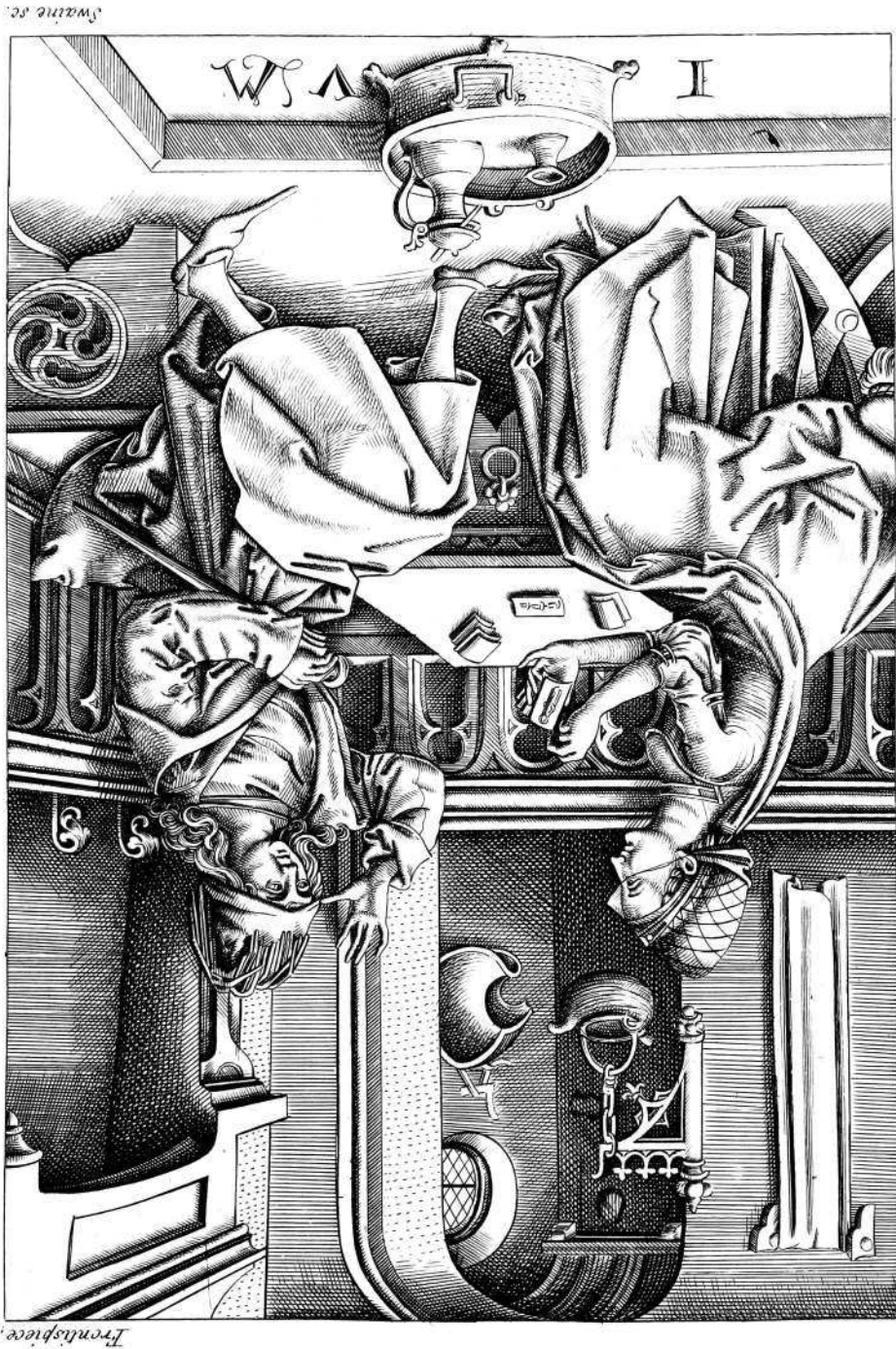
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LONDON :

By SAMUEL WELLER SINGER.

ENGRAVING ON WOOD.

AND

Origin of Printing

OF THE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

PLAYING CARDS;

INTO THE HISTORY OF

RESEARCHES

THE AUTHOR,  
BY HIS OBEDIENT AND FAITHFUL SERVANT,  
THE FOLLOWING PAGES ARE DEDICATED,  
FROM HIS WRITINGS,  
AND IN GRATEFUL REMEMBRANCE OF THE PLEASURE DERIVED  
THE HIGHEST ADMIRATION OF HIS DOMESTIC AND PATRIOTIC VIRTUES,  
IN TESTIMONY OF  
WILLIAM ROSCOE, ESQ.  
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This has alternately been considered the most interesting, and the dullest part of a book; but the common consent of authors in all ages has made it an almost necessary accompaniment of every species of literary composition. Prefaces may not unaptly be compared to letters of recommendation written by a partial friend, and must be received by those to whom they are addressed with the same indulgence. In this part of the writer's and the reader's intercourse, it is allowable to descend from the dignity of authorship, to unbend from austere forms and dry formalities; it is here that the writer may without offence obtrude himself upon the reader, and explain his pretensions to hold

introduction.  
 critical tribunal, I shall offer a few words by way of a literary novice on his first appeal to a conformity with custom, and impressed with that anxious feeling which attends seem an unnecessary appendage, yet in PREFACE to a tribe of this nature may




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## P R E F A C E.

converse with him for a season : with this view I proceed to state what may be expected on the present occasion.

It had some time been my intention to have given a translation of the learned Bullet's "*Recherches sur les Cartes à Jouer*," when accident threw in my way the very early pack of German cards which are engraved in the following work : this led to the perusal of the ingenious papers upon the subject in the eighth volume of the *Archæologia*. The subsequent acquisition of the curious Essay by Brietkopf, and the kind communications and friendly aid of Francis Douce, Esq. whose collection was freely thrown open to me, led to an alteration of plan, and materials having accumulated, what was at first intended to have formed a small pamphlet, has grown up into a formidable volume.

A subject which was deemed by a first-rate scholar worthy of his attention, may be supposed not entirely uninteresting. Dr. Hyde, the learned orientalist, who has published a very curious book upon Chess, announced his intention of giving the world a History of Cards. Whether more serious objects diverted his attention, or whether he was disappointed in his enquiries, and found the results too unimportant for his purpose, I know not ; but his promise to the public was never made good ; nor among his papers which have been preserved, is there any evidence of his having made collections on the subject. Those who take in-

The first section is devoted to the Origin of Cards. The principal novelty consists in the specimens of oriental cards, and in the opinions built upon them. I trust the deductions drawn from the materials collected are not overstrained, but such only as are warranted by the evidence adduced. In enquiries of this nature it is unfortunately necessary to call in the aid of conjecture; for it has been justly observed, that those who would fix the epoch of the invention or the nation to whom it belongs, must be enabled to draw their materials from very remote sources, and that but little assistance is to be derived from European writers.

The history of Playing-cards is so intimately connected with the origin of the arts of Engraving on Wood and Printing, that a large portion of the second section will be found devoted to a consideration of the probable source whence those arts were derived. If the account which gives the honor of the invention of Xylo-

rest in researches of this kind, will join me in regretting that we have been deprived of the information which his great learning and extensive reading would have enabled him to furnish, particularly from those sources whence most was to be expected, the oriental writers. It is feared the reader, in perusing the following pages, will have but too much cause to lament that the subject has fallen into the hands of so unworthy a successor.

But there are a few individuals who have declared cannot reasonably be expected to have any sympathy. which those whose pursuits are of a different nature, tion, acquire a consequence in our estimation, with to them, for objects which have long engaged the atten- more importance than the reader will be pleased to allow These inquiries may perhaps have been deemed of most interesting of the games at cards.

The third section embraces what scanty information could be collected respecting some of the principal and in uncertainty.

regretted that on this subject so much must still be left a mature consideration seemed to warrant. It is to be of the question, deducing from it the conclusions which dice, and have given the evidence fairly on both sides least, I have endeavoured to divest my mind of preju- time will, I trust, be considered the most impartial; at hitherto given to the English reader, and at the same the merit of being the most complete which has been history here attempted, it is believed, may lay claim to higher degree of interest. The sketch of Typographical gives to the whole inquiry more importance, and a to these objects of amusement: and this circumstance

“ Which breathes a soul into our silent walls,”

graphy to the Card-makers be credited, it will be obvious that we owe the rise of that art

themselves interested in the subjects here treated, whose approbation, if obtained, will amply repay my labours. I could not expect that a work of this nature should have any claim to popular favour, and indeed the small impression which has been taken off, demonstrates my expectations in this respect.

Unused to literary composition, and engaged in avocations of more immediate and indispensable necessity, the following pages, compiled at remote intervals of leisure, will no doubt bear marks of the desultory manner in which they have been composed, and of the want of skill in the writer. I have no better apology to offer for all imperfections of style and arrangement in the book: and I urge not this to deprecate criticism, sensible of the truth of the assertion, "that the disadvantages under which an author labours are no excuse for the imperfections of his work." But anxious it should be understood that I am not unconscious of some of its defects, which would have been avoided, had my abilities equalled the desire I felt to justify the partiality of those at whose instance, and under whose patronage, it has been written.

Of the Prints, which may be considered the most interesting feature in the present work, I may be permitted to speak in terms of just commendation; they do honour to the artists employed. The typographical

Mr. Swaine for the Engravings on Copper. Mr. E. Byfield for those on Wood.

*North End, Fulham, Feb. 16th, 1816.*

execution is in character with all the beautiful productions of Mr. Bensley's press: England has reason to be proud of the perfection to which this art has arrived in his hands.

To hope for fame or profit from an undertaking of such limited interest would be unreasonable; and amid the *funnum et opes strepitumque* of this period big with the fate of nations, what writer of Archæological *nuove* can expect to be heard, even if he possessed the taste and graceful diction of a Watton?

It is however only by comparison that the value and utility of any human pursuit can be appreciated; perhaps those who spend no small portion of their lives in examining the form of a crystal, or settling the genus of an insect, are more usefully, and certainly more innocently employed, than some of the heroes of the historic muse. The *besoin d'agir* reigns in every bosom, and it is well for those of whose amusements it may be said that they are at least harmless; at the same time, they only are the truly well employed, whose lives are devoted to the amelioration of the condition of their fellow beings.



No apology is offered for printing the documents in this Appendix in their respective original languages; the substance of most of them is already to be found in the book, and they are only here collected with a view to those who may be desirous of comparison, or further investigation.

It has been thought advisable to reprint the little Essay upon Cards by the Abbé Rive entire, as it has become so extremely scarce, that an application to obtain it of the principal Booksellers in Paris and London has been repeatedly made by a friend without success. The curious extracts from Court de Gebelin's Dissertation are also given because his voluminous work is but in few hands. The reader will be pleased to see the important paper of Dr. Buchan in this place, and we are happy to be instrumental in giving it to the Public. The information afforded by the kindness of J. P. Cruden, Esq. calls for our grateful thanks.

Some portion of the following Appendix consists of matter referred to in the foregoing pages, and some part of it, of materials obtained too late to be of use in the compilation. Of this latter kind are the extracts from the Italian Poem on the game of *Trocco* and the excerpts from Cardanus: we regretted that we had been unable to give a description of the game of *Trappola*, and these extracts furnish it.

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