Art in Your Pocket

Artist Trading Cards (ATCs)

This article is available as a 16-page booklet, illustrated with many of my own ATCs printed full-size. More practical than a guide on the screen, this is a great little gift to get for a creative child or someone wanting to try their hand at ATCs! It is available in my bookstore.

To see more of my own cards, visit my ATC gallery.

ATC stands for Artist Trading Card. This article is both a primer and an idea bank intended for those who wonder what an ATC is and how to make one. (Please don't ask me how and where to trade, the reference site for this is ATCs: A Collaborative Cultural Performance.)

The very basics

As their name indicates, ATC are collectables, a brilliant idea born of the older sports-themed trading cards. The one rule that makes an ATC derives from this: the dimensions of the ATC must be 2.5"x3.5", or 64x89mm.

To this rule are appended a couple of conventions. First, an ATC mustn't be sold, only exchanged, as the whole essence of these tiny works of art is about artists meeting (by correspondence or online if need be) and exchanging their works, thus meeting many artists and getting exposed to many personal styles.

Second, on the back of each ATC the artist writes part or all of the following information: name, contact information, title of the ATC and number (1/8, 2/8...) if it's part of an edition. By definition ATCs are made in limited numbers, often no more than one of a kind. Unique ATCs are called originals; sets of identical ATCs are called editions and are numbered; sets of ATCs that are based on one theme but that are different are called series. Don't be intimidated by the concept of small editions or originals: very few people are anal about this. What most collectors really want are cards that were made with care. Based on that, numbers are meaningless.

That's all! The above is all you need to know to start making your own ATCs. Common sense dictates that they should be sturdy enough to survive mailing, and of reasonable thickness (unless you specifically want them otherwise. Transparent card sleeves are useful to protect the cards if need be. This is particularly true if they can easily get smudged or if the medium might stick during transport.

Extra things to know or do
I store the ATCs I make in this box till it's time to send them out

» ATC envelopes: A lovely alternative to transparent sleeves when sending several cards is to create an ATC envelope. A template for such an envelope can be found at Mirkwood Designs, or you can download my own template in Photoshop layers. This template allows you to print the outlines for two envelopes on a sheet of paper (pretty paper, giftwrap, or anything else cut to printer size), or to decorate your envelopes digitally before printing. Just turn off the top layer, which contains instructions, and it's ready to print. It goes without saying that you can make your own template and come up with your own envelopes.

» What to do with your collection: A popular solution are those nifty albums with 9-pocket sheets available for commercial cards. But many people also keep them in boxes so that they can enjoy taking them out and handling them as they flip through. Others collect them in panels or picture frames to display in their home. I've heard of people sewing a plastic pocket to their handbags to display a different card every week, and someone placing a card inside their name tag, turning it into a piece of unusual jewelry. Some even make special handmade books to display theirs. The sky's the limit!

» Signature cards: Many ATC artists create a "business card" ATC that features a self-portrait on the front and a fact sheet about themselves on the back. They then send it out with sets they are trading. This is a lovely idea that allows artists to get to know each other more. Make it good -- this is your image in the ATC-trading world!

» Design issues to consider: My personal piece of advice before you start would be: as you sit down to create your own cards, don't think of them as works of art scaled down. Many stamp designers make this mistake when they create stamps for the postal office. Think at the scale of the card, don't go into techniques that are only suitable for larger projects, but on the contrary think of what the small size allows you to do that wouldn't be otherwise possible. You know how a group picture becomes so uninteresting when scaled down too much, because you can't even see faces anymore? This is an example of a subject that would be wasted on a small size.

In case this hasn't transpired yet, any and all art/craft/design techniques are permissible here, including completely new ones! Below you'll find a compilation of ideas for techniques and themes.

Achieving the format

I can think of three ways to get the correct format. One is to cut the support to the right size before you start working; the second is to work on a large surface and then cut out the cards from it; the third would be to use commercial trading cards, cover them with a layer of paper or paint, and use them as readymade canvasses (playing cards are also the right size if you like cards with
round edges). I use the first method a lot, especially when I get paper scraps that have potential but that I don't want to use on the spot: I cut them to the right size and save them for later. When I'm dealing with themes that require spontaneity and I don't want to feel constricted by a small canvas, I use the second method. I made myself a frame the size of an ATC, cut into a large piece of board. I move the frame around on my composition until I find a cropping I like, then I mark the corners and cut it out. I repeat until I've used up all the interesting parts of the painted surface.

I've also seen lovely ATCs that had been made in series by drawing the motif along a long horizontal strip that was then cut up to obtain a bunch of similar but not identical "tiled" cards.

![Image]

“Tottall Ranges Dry River Bed and Tracks”
tiled ATC by **Llewena Newell**

### Classic techniques

Almost any Fine Arts medium can be put to the miniature canvas of an ATC, either alone or in combination with others: pencil sketch, charcoal, cartoon, watercolor, markers, colour pencils, pastel, crayons, inks, dotting, collage, photography, calligraphy... Below are examples of cards based on traditional media.

![Image]

“Nervous Mail”
Drawn ATC by **Danial Powers**
Collage ATC by Lynn Dewart

"The Lay of Leithian"
Calligraphy ATC by Reed C. Bowman

"Double Happiness Symbol"
Crayon ATC by Den Tan

Photo ATC by Shafina Sheridan
A specialized kind of collage is what we call cut-outs or papercutting – shapes cut out from flat-colour paper and arranged in a composition. The shapes can be abstract and assembled together like a mosaic to create an image, or they can be cut into specific shapes like the card on the left. Flat colour compositions such as this have a bold, clean feel to them and they can be combined very nicely with images cut out from magazines or drawn, as on the right.

A way to make cut-outs that require careful assemblage is to draw your composition and then use tracing paper to trace every shape you'll need separately. Then transfer each shape to the paper of the appropriate color and finally cut them out and put them back together. Using this method I have made very successful cut-out portraits by tracing the shapes of the facial features and hair straight off pictures.

The very old method of “reserving” areas before painting (batik) yields beautiful results. Use a white candle (or coloured if you wish) to draw motifs on the card. Make sure you get plenty of wax on the paper. Then brush ink or watercolour paint all over it -- the paint doesn’t stick to the wax. The effect is very tribal.
> ATCs are traditionally on light paper for the design to show, but fluorescent gel pens on dark colors can give a brilliant effect, especially when the subject matter fits this medium. Similarly intense colours can be achieved with the following technique: drawing in pen, coloring on it with super-waxy crayons and then painting over with with a color of speedball. It's very colorful with a messy effect, bringing a strange life to your drawings.

> A good old method is rubbing, especially white crayon or wax rubbings with an ink wash. Use lightweight paper to do the rubbings then use a glue stick to secure it to the card support. You can use any and all surfaces you find in the house or outdoors for rubbings, or create your own by cutting out thick board in the desired shapes and gluing it strongly to another piece of board (cheapboard available in architecture stores is great for this).

> Printmaking can be achieved through a variety of means, from commercial stamps to carved potatoes to fallen leaves to your own homemade stamps cut out of board or carved in an eraser. Unless you're making your own stamps, which can be works of art by themselves, don't just stamp the card with a commercial stamp and leave it as is -- that's cheap and looks more like a store display for the pattern than like a creative work.

> Create and cut out your own stencils in card, using an X-acto blade. You can use any kind of paint dabbed with a special brush or a piece of cloth, or spraypaints.

> Transfer: Use acetone (pure, can be found in pharmacies) to transfer from xeroxed pieces of paper. The best result is obtained with traditional photocopies (not laser).
When I was a kid I explored the following technique: drawing with a dry point, pressing well to deboss the line into the paper, and then lightly coloring with pencils or crayons. My drawing would show up in white outlines against the colour. Combined with other techniques, this can yield amazing results. Perhaps it would be worth it to try and print on a sheet of card that's been debossed this way?

Needles and all that implies

"Snow Flint": Needle punch ATC by Autumn

Punch the cards with a needle to make tiny pin prick images. Use an image laid on top of an ATC blank and the results can be pretty amazing, depending on what parts of that image you choose to focus on.

Much can be done with thread on cards, as you can see in the examples below. You can thread them, embroider them, or use a sewing machine! You can use carefully designed patterns or total randomness, etc...

"Vert Sacred Spiral"
Sewn ATC by Autumn

"Sew What?" embroidered ATC by Leslie Green

Beads can be used in various ways, such as sewn individually, threaded, or glued. They make wonderful accents as they themselves come in endless variations to fit all themes.
“Kokopelli Night”: a simple row of sewn beads bring this card to life

“Blue Leaf”: threaded beads ATC by Carolyn

Unusual materials

“Aztec Burial”: foil ATC

- Foil is an awesome thing when used appropriately. For this Aztec-themed ATC, I had this mask icon I wanted to use but didn’t know what to do with. I gave it a rich blue background and printed it on off-white card. I bought a roll of golden metallic paper from the stationery store, crumpled it up, then smoothened it out again. I tore pieces out of it and applied them to the corners as shown here. The result is truly stunning and looks (close enough) like gold leaf peeling off something ancient.

- Fabric (embroidered, painted, patchwork...), can be attached to a card, either as the main focus of the card or as one element in a more complex composition.
If like me you have bunches of duplicate pictures from your trips or other that you don't know what to do with, reuse them. They make great backgrounds on which to stick or paint new elements. The mere fact of tracing out the outlines in a black pen can turn a simple picture into something very interesting.

Sheets of thin plexiglas are available in architecture stores. Cutting them is a pain (you're better off using fake plexiglas, from the same shops, or having them cut them for you), but it's a small price to pay for such a wonderful transparent surface! However, you can also find acetate sheets in copy centers – they're much thinner, but crystal-clear.

The reason I love plexiglas is that I have it laser-engraved to obtain a beautiful white-on-transparent effect that I love to contrast with a small but richly coloured and textured element, as shown below (although that card was scanned on black so that the white would show).

If you can spread polymer clay (FIMO, Super Sculpey...) thin enough, and cut it to the exact dimensions of an ATC, you can obtain wonderful results. Different colours of clay can be mixed to obtain a marbling effect before spreading; different objects both manufactured and natural can be used to create imprints in it; small things like the crystal balls inside ink cartridges can be pushed in; etc... It is also possible to simply create small elements in clay and then attach them to the cards, like I did below to recall the beetle in the stamp.

Ever wondered what melted crayons would look like? Apparently they look quite good!
Color Zip-a-tone is an exciting material to use. It is translucent, so that different colours of zipaton superimposed will give new colours. A Zip-a-tone collage on acetate will give an effect akin to stained glass. Beautiful!

I am very fond of crisp black silhouettes on richly coloured textures. While working on my final year project I discovered my dream material -- black vinyl. For ATC, I created a series of shapes - symbols, animals -- on Illustrator, fit as many of them as possible on the surface of an A4, and had them cut out in that material. Copy centers should be able to do this for you, and a single A4 is quite cheap (it cost me a little more than $3): all you have to do is prepare your shapes in a vector software like Adobe Illustrator or CorelDraw. The computer is not necessary though -- you can get your hands on a piece of vinyl and cut it out yourself, with scissors or X-acto.

Introducing wire to a card immediately creates action and interest.

Plastic that shrinks and hardens when baked (called Shrinky Dink in the US) is difficult to control if you intend to make a full ATC out of it, but it works very nicely for elements to be attached to the card, such as the murex shell holding the fabric in place in the card below.
Metal is heavy but it’s a wonderful field for experimentation and special effects. To be able to achieve the full range of effects you naturally need a rather complete metalsmith’s equipment, but many things can be done with stuff as accessible as lemon juice.

Thinner sheets of copper or the like, found in craft store, are much lighter and allow for easier physical manipulation: bending, cutting, debossing, alteration... For the card below I debossed the pattern and inserted a couple of stained glass beads where I wanted red enamel, and put it in the oven -- only to forget it there. I later found that the copper had achieved a beautiful iridescent red hue due to its prolonged heating. By experimenting with the same copper at different temperature and times I discovered I could more or less decide what colour I wanted it to take in the end. experiment, but watch that oven!

Unwanted negatives are great art material. Did you know that two pieces of film sewn together side by side are the exact width of an ATC? That means possibilities, doesn’t it!

Spraypaints can yield interesting results: the card on the left is part of a series that was made by spraying onto a piece of cardboard held at an angle, letting the watery paint drip down onto the ATCs.

Other alternative stuff you can do something with: band-aids, nailpolish, crepe paper, wrapping paper, yarn, playing cards, tea-straining paper, incense paper, perfume (for scented cards), salt (spread white glue then sprinkle), glitter, postal stamps, old tickets and receipts, negatives, transparent wrappings...
Last but not least, a great idea is to recycle all your paper scraps and make them part of new ATCs. The cards being so small, insignificant bits of paper are often just the right size. Paper leftovers, envelopes, torn stamps, greeting cards, anything you would normally throw away, reconsider carefully before trashing them.
Illustrator and Photoshop
(For this section I am including the Photoshop template that I use when I need to print out ATCs. Download it here. You can use it to work in Photoshop (or another graphic software) or print out the outlines to work manually. Either way it is ready to print.)

Many artists have mixed feelings about computer-generated ATCs. Such qualms are superfluous: the computer is just another tool to obtain a result that another tool couldn’t achieve. The beauty or cheapness of a card is not determined by whether it was printed out or handmade, but by the work and vision (or lack thereof) put into it by the artist. That said, nothing says you can’t mix computer and manual techniques. Using both together is one of my favourite ATC media. There are a number of ways to make your computer-generated ATCs more than a simple printout and as unique as handmade cards.

Digital ATC by Shafina Sheridan

Print on different types of paper. There is a huge variety of printer paper in the market, or paper you can experiment printing on. If it’s recycled, porous, coloured, calque, metallic, etc, you’ll end up with some pretty surprising results. To the right you can see a single ATC design,
Print your motifs on card, then apply wax over them in wide blotches. Then, apply a coat of ink or paint over the whole paper (not necessarily evenly). Where you put wax over your printed motifs, the paint won’t catch, so they will be visible in the background. You can also do it the other way around, by painting/drawing on the paper, then waxing it, and finally printing bold designs on top.

“Diving Memories”: the fibrous paper chosen fittingly evokes the texture of underwater growth

“Celtic Drake” Printed on waxed paper then rubbed

Rub a paper with wax before printing, and afterwards carefully rub the wax with a clean and slightly damp kitchen towel -- the toner will roughly wipe off the wax thus producing an interesting aged effect. This works even better if you print on off-white or yellowish paper.

Contrast the clean flat colours of vectorised graphics with the rich texture of special paper. The fish on the right went from “lovely but pointless fish” to “full-fledged exciting composition you want to touch”.

Draw randomly on an A4 piece of paper -- symbols, sketches, colour blots, finger painting... Anything will do as long as it doesn’t interfere with the paper going through the printer next. If you use stuff that the toner can’t stick on (clear nailpolish perhaps?), all the better! Prepare your ATC’s central motif on the computer and repeat it within an A4-sized document. You can print out 8 ATCs on a single A4, so tile the motif 8 times if you want it to appear once per card, or more if you want a wallpaper effect. Print this out on the paper you prepared. The result is unpredictable, often delightful and always unique!
After printing, paint the cards with acrylic metallic paints (those that cost 87 cents a bottle, they last a very long time) for a shimmery effect.

- Brush, rub or sponge paint onto drawing paper then print black & white images on it.
- I wonder if printing on damp paper would look cool or very bad (or kill the printer).
- Try dropping drops of acetone (found in pharmacies) on a printed design.
- Take a wet paintbrush to your printed cards to make the toner diffuse just enough for it not to look so printed anymore. Then try to apply glue all over it with a glue stick: this dries clear and makes the ATC look almost like a painting.

"Paper Crane" printed in 3 runs.

- Here's an idea taken directly from design students' experience with printing mistakes. A simple design can gain interest if printed in several runs, meaning you print one part, then put the paper back into the printer and print the second part, etc. The result is an overlay of inks that produces colours and effects which cannot be obtained through a one-run print. The card on the left was created this way. In my Photoshop file I have 3 layers: pink, purple and lime. The pink and purple layer were created independently. First I hid the lime and purple layers to print the pink, then I made the purple visible and hid the pink to print the purple. The lime layer was created by selecting the areas of both previous layers and stroking the selection on a new layer. Note that before stroking, I contracted the selection so that the lime would overlay the other two by more than just the printer's inaccuracy. The result is that the cranes' silhouettes overlap each other and they have a common outline that's slightly offset to create more interest. It's a lot easier than it sounds, and you can experiment with overlaying anything and anyhow. Printing a motif for instance then turning the paper around and printing the very same motif again, but upside-down, can create a very nice visual.

- After adding manual touches to computer work, try the reverse! Look into your old sketchbooks for interesting bits that can be scanned, resized, given a fresh treatment and printed. For instance
I have been scanning mail I receive in an interesting handwriting to blow it up, play with its transparency, and turn it into typographic compositions as unique as the sender's handwriting.

**Paper only**

“Origami/blue”
Randomly folded origami combined with green card

During my first year of design we had a project where we had to represent such notions as fast/slow, hard/soft, rough/smooth using nothing but white paper. It was an awesome project and while we don't need to limit ourselves to white paper while making ATCs, we can do wonders with using only paper that is cut, folded, glued, handmade, torn, hardened, and otherwise made expressive.

- Origami can serve to create small creatures or wonderful paper dolls to be glued on ATCs as a part of a composition, or it could make the card itself. All you need to do is fold it any way you fancy and then insert another piece of colored paper or card to complete the correct rectangle.

- Papier mâché is made by cutting or tearing paper into strips and dipping them in a mixture of white glue and water. The strips are then placed on top of a mold (maybe a cardboard box, a balloon, anything) one by one, until several layers of strips cover the mold, and left to dry. The result is hard as wood and can be painted; the white glue becomes completely transparent when dry. Last year I used papier mâché to make gift boxes for all the members of my family, using different kinds of paper every time. I believe interesting “hard” ATCs could be made out of this technique.

Origami doll ATC
by Jen Hook
Don’t underestimate the potential of translucent paper, whether it’s normal tracing paper (calque) or the fancy colored shimmery types! Use several layers of calque and play with the transparency. Slip things in between or draw on different layers. The card on the left takes advantage of the fact that layering calque makes it more opaque. I was able to achieve an effect of Undine coming out of pearly water that becomes more see-through as we near the surface. On the right, the large blocky script (yes it’s script) was painted with acrylic on the back of the tracing paper, which gave it this ghostly background presence behind the more delicate script.

If you’re going to store a card in a sleeve, you can use oil to stain the paper and create a translucent effect. Make sure you’re in control though or you’ll end up with a mess!
Sometimes just using the right kind of paper as a background is enough to achieve a special touch. A simple pen sketch on delicately rich paper (see left), or a design in white pencil over dark textured paper, etc... The possibilities are endless and experimenting will allow you to figure out how to achieve the exact feel you want.

When you have interesting paper at hand, a magic recipe is to combine two kinds and a die-cut. A die-cut is a shape cut into the paper. Use the most interesting of the two papers (perhaps corrugated paper or something strongly textured or coloured) as the background, and in the top layer made up of the second type of paper, cut out a clear shape such as an animal or object. You can use art punches as well. The contrast will look lovely, and if need be you can always add some design elements with a pen.

If all you had at hand was a single piece of paper and a cutting tool, you could still make something stunning by creating a weave. Weaves can be as simple as the straight, regular weave or go into mind-boggling shapes. More than ever trial and error is what will help you. You can even weave photography for some real amazing effects.
Casting paper allows you to create motifs "sculpted" from the paper. For this card, a mold was made, and paper made from torn tissue paper mixed with colouring was pressed into the mold then left to dry.

If you can't find interesting paper, why not make it yourself? There are plenty of sites on the Internet that teach how to make one's own paper. One of my colleagues did her thesis on papermaking and she came up with the most amazing varieties of paper -- textured, scented, and even edible!

To infinity and beyond

Take your cards to a whole new dimension by giving them depth, three-dimensionality, interactivity or even motion! Nothing is impossible if you're ready to work on it till they function the way you want them to.

The dimensions that define an ATC are a strict rule, but that doesn't mean they must be rectangular. any shape you want to cut that still coincides with a 3 1/2" by 2 1/2" rectangle is acceptable. Such die-cuts, whether they just address the corners or the whole shape of the card, are fun when they serve your subject. In this case I couldn't resist cutting out the contour of the Lebanese house as well as the arcades, which allow a background to peep through, and the door, which can be opened to reveal a little message.

The concept of 3D ATCs is not universally accepted (many feel they have no use for a card that can't fit into a sleeve), but it's a very promising one (and, as demonstrated in this shadowbox ATC, an appetizing one).
Now we enter the realm of interactive cards, which can't be fully appreciated until they are toyed with. On the left, a simple layer that is rotated aside tells part of the card's story. On the right, three acetate layers that need to be moved one by one create a progression until you discover the end of the story.

The interactivity can be made more complex – think of Nick Bantock's folded letters, for instance. A card can also be itself completely folded and require much unfolding to reveal its contents, or constitute a pop-up once it's opened. I don't have the heart to do such a thing, but you could consider self-destructing cards – cards you need to destroy or damage to get to the heart of things, much like a wrapped present.
Confessions of an animator... I couldn’t help myself. I had to animate ATCs one way or the other, and here are two techniques I worked with. Below is a wheel-based system: turn the wheel and different images show up in the cut-out windows. You can just see the wheel jutting out from the right side of the card.

Next is a good old flipbook system: the top sheet is designed as an independent ATC, with 9 other sheets that are meant to be flicked with the thumb to animate the little guy. This can be done by hand – it’s actually easier than having to print them. Since there are so few sheets, in order for it to be successful, it’s important that the pages not be exactly on top of each other. Page 2 juts out from under page one by just a hair, and so on. This way the thumb can catch them properly.

The number of themes that can be tackled in ATCs is even more limitless than the number of techniques, but here are just a few that are either popular or particularly neat, to get your imagination warmed up.
9-card composition in a binder sheet

民营经济

Jam ATCs: collaborative cards where a person starts working on it then passes it on to the next artist, and so on.

Series of visually related cards around a given theme (cats, mythical creatures, Asia, a holiday...), visual (colour, number, letter...), medium...

4, 6, or 8 ATCs that work together in puzzle fashion while still functioning as independent compositions. The ultimate number is 9, where the 9 cards can be arranged in the 9 pockets of a binder sheet to create a larger image (like on the left).

Illustrations of poem extracts or quotes.

Postal stamps with their tiny designs are particularly suited to become the subjects of ATCs, as are for instance passport or photobooth shots (left).

A series that tells a story like the frames of a comic book.

Witty cards (below).

Finally I’ll just share with you my own favorite themes so far: experimental/innovative ATCs that explore new techniques and media; cards based on the art of world cultures, whether
existing or imaginary; themes that require mixing media; themes that represent a design or technical challenge; symbols, typefaces, and all that jazz...

"I am Chinese-Canadian": witty ATC by Vincci T

Less is more

The treasure trove of ideas above may intimidate beginners into thinking trading cards need to be very elaborate or professional or they won't be accepted. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just because we can do anything, doesn't mean the simplest thing we can do is no good. All this is here so that you can find the method you enjoy working with the most, no matter how basic or intricate. Here's an example of a very simple card that doesn't require any gimmick to be beautiful.

"Joy": ATC by Cynthia Sillitoe

As a word in closing, one may wonder why a professional artist or designer would bother with Artist Trading Cards, such small things that disappear so quickly into someone else's album, never to emerge again? I'd say they have every reason to bother. Because they are art for the sake of art, ATCs are a precious reminder to amateurs and professional alike of what creativity is about – the pleasure of working with beauty and the excitement of being surprised by experimental techniques, as opposed as doing the work for pay or fame. They require such a small investment in equipment and time that there is no practicality headache associated, and the results can be surprisingly inspiring and useful for future professional projects. I personally think working on ATCs between larger projects has something of the freshness and simple joy we had when drawing as children. Let's not forget also the pleasure of the exchange, face to face with like-minded people!