

history of the postcard

The history of the postcard is a fascinating journey that intertwines art, communication, and social interaction. Emerging in the 19th century, postcards have evolved significantly over time, reflecting changes in technology, culture, and society. This article explores the origins, development, and impact of postcards, revealing how they became an integral part of personal and commercial communication.

Origins of the Postcard

The concept of sending a message through the mail can be traced back to ancient civilizations, but the postcard as we know it today began to take shape in the early 1800s.

Early Beginnings

The first known use of a postcard in the modern sense occurred in 1840 when the British postal service introduced the Penny Post. This service allowed individuals to send letters for a low fee, which spurred the demand for a more efficient means of communication.

In 1848, the first official postcard was issued in Austria by postal official Heinrich von Stephan. This card was primarily used for official correspondence, and it featured a simple design. However, it was not until 1865 that the first picture postcard was produced in the United Kingdom, showcasing a photograph of the city of London.

Postcards in the United States

The United States embraced the postcard phenomenon in the late 19th century. The Post Office Department began allowing private companies to manufacture postcards in 1871. By 1898, the U.S. government officially recognized postcards as a legitimate form of mail, allowing them to be sent at a reduced rate. This marked a significant milestone in the history of the postcard.

Golden Age of Postcards

The period from 1898 to World War I is often referred to as the "Golden Age of Postcards." During this time, postcards became immensely popular, both for personal communication and as collectible items.

Artistic Evolution

Postcards during this era featured a wide variety of artistic designs, ranging from scenic landscapes to humorous illustrations. Artists began to see postcards as a legitimate medium for their work. The introduction of color lithography allowed for vibrant and detailed images, making postcards visually appealing.

Key features of postcards from the Golden Age include:

- Divided Back: In 1907, the divided back postcard was introduced, allowing for a message to be written on one side and the address on the other. This innovation made postcards more user-friendly and encouraged more people to send them.
- Souvenir Postcards: Tourist destinations began producing their own postcards, showcasing local attractions, landmarks, and culture. This trend contributed to the rise of postcards as souvenirs for travelers.
- Collecting Culture: The popularity of postcards led to a collecting craze among individuals. Many people began to collect postcards as a hobby, leading to the establishment of postcard clubs and exhibitions.

Role in Social Communication

Postcards became a staple of social interaction, allowing people to share their experiences and thoughts with friends and family. They served as a means of communication that was quick, inexpensive, and visually appealing.

During this time, postcards were often used to convey messages such as:

- Greetings: Sending a postcard to say hello or wish someone well became commonplace.
- Travel Updates: Travelers would send postcards to inform loved ones of their adventures and experiences.
- Celebrations: Postcards were commonly sent during holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions, often featuring festive designs.

The Impact of World War I

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 had a profound impact on the postcard industry.

Postcards as Propaganda

Governments recognized the potential of postcards as a tool for propaganda. They produced postcards to boost morale, encourage enlistment, and promote national pride. These postcards often featured patriotic imagery and messages aimed at rallying support for the war effort.

Changes in Production and Distribution

The war also led to changes in the production and distribution of postcards. Many artists and manufacturers were drafted into military service, resulting in a decline in the production of artistic postcards. Additionally, the focus shifted toward more practical designs that conveyed messages of support for the troops and their families.

The Decline and Resurgence of Postcards

After World War I, the popularity of postcards began to decline, largely due to the rise of other forms of communication, such as the telephone and later, electronic mail.

Postcards in the Mid-20th Century

In the mid-20th century, postcards saw a resurgence, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. The growth of tourism and travel contributed to this revival, as more people sought to document their experiences through postcards.

Key developments during this period include:

- Photo Postcards: The advent of affordable photography made it possible for individuals to create their own photo postcards, further personalizing the medium.
- Cultural Icons: Postcards featuring famous celebrities, movies, and cultural phenomena became popular collectibles.

The Digital Age

The late 20th and early 21st centuries brought about a new challenge for postcards due to the rise of the internet and digital communication. However, postcards have not disappeared entirely. Instead, they have adapted to new technologies and trends.

- E-Postcards: The introduction of electronic postcards (e-postcards) allowed users to send virtual postcards via email, catering to a tech-savvy audience.
- Social Media: Platforms like Instagram and Facebook have created a new avenue for sharing visual memories, but traditional postcards still hold nostalgic value for many.
- Artisan and Vintage Markets: There has been a resurgence in interest for vintage and artisan postcards, with collectors and enthusiasts seeking out unique designs and historical pieces.

The Cultural Significance of Postcards

Postcards hold a unique place in our culture and continue to resonate with people around the world.

Personal Connection

Sending and receiving postcards fosters a sense of connection and intimacy. The act of choosing a postcard, writing a personal message, and sending it through the mail creates a tangible link between sender and recipient.

Artistic Medium

Postcards remain a popular medium for artists, photographers, and designers who use them as a canvas to express creativity. Many contemporary artists produce limited edition postcards that are sought after by collectors.

Historical Documentation

Postcards serve as valuable historical documents, capturing moments in time and reflecting societal changes. They provide insights into cultural trends, tourism, and communication practices, making them significant artifacts for historians and researchers.

Conclusion

The history of the postcard is a rich tapestry of innovation, communication, and art. From its humble beginnings in the 19th century to its status as a cherished form of personal expression, postcards have left an indelible mark on our social fabric. Although they face challenges from modern technology, postcards continue to hold a unique place in our hearts, serving as a reminder of the power of communication and the art of connection. As we move forward, the postcard's legacy will undoubtedly endure, adapting to new forms while retaining its charm and significance.

Frequently Asked Questions

What year is considered the birth year of the postcard?

The postcard is generally considered to have originated in 1840, with the introduction of the Penny Post in the United Kingdom.

How did the design of postcards evolve during the late 19th century?

During the late 19th century, postcards evolved to include colorful illustrations and photographs, reflecting the artistic movements of the time and the advent of new printing technologies.

What was the impact of the introduction of the picture postcard?

The introduction of the picture postcard in the early 1900s revolutionized the medium, as it allowed for mass-produced images of landmarks, events, and everyday life, making them highly collectible.

How did World War I influence postcard production?

World War I led to an increase in postcard production as soldiers sent them home, and many cards were produced to boost morale, featuring patriotic themes and war-related imagery.

What role did postcards play in tourism during the early 20th century?

Postcards became an essential tool for tourism in the early 20th century, serving as souvenirs and a means for travelers to share their experiences and destinations with friends and family.

How have postcards adapted to the digital age?

In the digital age, postcards have adapted by incorporating digital designs and online services, allowing users to create and send virtual postcards via email or social media, while still maintaining a nostalgic appeal.

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