

# An Entangled Object: The Picture Postcard as Souvenir and Collectible, Exchange and Ritual Communication

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## Abstract

*The picture postcard craze went hand in hand with the rise of a new consumer culture, a more affluent society, and a new middle class. Modernity is the common denominator and the frame of reference. However, these cards served a multiplicity of uses and functions including as collectibles, ritual communication, and gift exchanges, and were enmeshed in a tangle of relationships. What characterized the craze for the picture postcard a century ago and guaranteed its enormous spread and popularity was precisely these enmeshed functions, concrete as well as symbolic, and the many layers of meaning invested in the postcard. Few material items are more aptly characterized as "an entangled object" than the picture postcard of the Golden Age.*

Indeed, there is one who corresponds with me too, but he's so foolish that he writes letters. Did you ever hear about anything so ridiculous? As if I care for a good-for-nothing letter! I cannot put a letter into my album, can I? What nonsense! When I get a real boyfriend I will simply insist that he send me the nicest postcards there are to be bought, instead of pestering me with those dull letters.

(Reflections of an anonymous Norwegian girl, "Brevkort og Backfischer" 1903, 41)

One of the most striking consumption phenomena at the beginning of the 20th century was the craze for the picture postcard.<sup>1</sup> The vogue started between 1895 and 1900 and faded out between 1915 and 1920. These two decades have been called the Golden Age of the picture postcard, and with good reason. The hunger for cards seized both young and old, males and females, in Europe and the USA, and on other continents as well. Except for the mania for the postage stamp, there had never been up to that time a more pervasive and ubiquitous fad for a material item. Roughly estimated, between 200 and 300 billion postcards were produced and sold during this Golden Age.<sup>2</sup>

## The Picture Postcard—an Icon of Modernity

The picture postcard has been the object of several studies. Its production and



The picture postcard was collectible no. 1 for young girls.  
Norwegian postcard from 1910, entitled “From the Postcard Shop.”

distribution, iconography, and semiotics have been analyzed by—among many others—Carline (1972), Ripert and Frère (1983), Ulvestad (1988), Schor (1992), Bogdan and Marshall (1995), and Geary and Webb (1998). I have discussed the collecting of postcards during the Golden Age myself in three articles (Rogan 1999, 2001a, and 2001b). Nevertheless, research perspectives on the postcard phenomenon have tended to be rather narrow and removed from their broader social and cultural contexts. Their iconography, representational and ideological connections, production techniques, distribution networks, and collecting modes—however fascinating—are only a part of the story. It is not pos-

sible to explain the enormous popularity of this non-essential material item and the billions of cards sold and mailed every year unless we also consider the card as an exchange object, a gift, and a message carrier. What triggered my curiosity about these things were (a) the fact that my research material—present-day collections of postcards from the Golden Age—often contain 50% or more of unused and unmailed cards, and (b) that the written messages generally contain very little information. It struck me that scholarly interest has concentrated on the picture side of the postcard, and that little work has been done on the significance of what is on, or not on, the other side of the card. In this essay, I shall look at both

sides of the postcard, at the messages inscribed by their users as much as at the imagery, and discuss these in terms of exchange ritual and communication.

Aesthetics and communication, ritual and symbol, technology and business, play and action, imagination and remembrance, desire and materiality, commodity as well as subjective experience. . . There seems to be no end to the perspectives that may be applied to the picture postcard, even if few of us will go as far as Östman when he stated that, "I. . . maintain that small, nice, mostly valueless picture postcards do have a very important function not only for the study of what is at the bottom of our discourse, but even for a deeper understanding of Man; the picture postcard stands—in a way—at the center of humanness" (1999–2000, 8). Östman himself approaches the phenomenon through a discourse analysis of a functional-pragmatic kind; he is, however, more convincing when it comes to the linguistic-textual analysis than in understanding the postcard as a material object and an agent of action (e.g., as a collectible, a gift).<sup>3</sup> An integrated theoretical approach would have been desirable, but is it really possible? So many different theories may be applied, depending on whether the focus is on the postcard as a collectible, a gift, a souvenir, a medium of communication, etc.

A holistic approach to the postcard should take account of the embeddedness of the object in contemporary culture. My point of departure is the postcard not "at the center of humanness" but rather as "an emissary of its culture," or as T.S. Eliot once put it: "Even

the humblest material artefact, which is the product and symbol of a particular civilization, is an emissary of the culture out of which it comes" (T.S. Eliot 1948, qtd. in Briggs 1988, 11). A century ago, the picture postcard meant much more, and very different things, than it does today. It arose out of new technologies and production processes, as a result of industrialization in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The postcard craze was a response to a new desire for things, created by an unprecedented access to commodities for broader population groups. It was a response to a longing for colorful images, made possible by new reproduction techniques. It was an answer to modern communication needs as mass tourism began to take off on a burgeoning scale. Furthermore, it satisfied new leisure habits, like the collecting interests of women—a group which until then had had few opportunities of finding an accepted outlet for such desires (actually, postcard collecting was started by women). In short, the picture postcard went hand in hand with the rise of a new consumer culture, a more affluent society, and a new middle class. All these developments seem to have coalesced in the picture-postcard boom. Modernity is the common denominator and the frame of reference.

### A Golden Age

The illustrated postcard craze, like the influenza, has spread to these islands [Great Britain] from the Continent, where it has been raging with considerable severity.

(The Standard, 1899)

The popularity of the picture postcard rose steadily through the 1890s, as appearance, colors, and printing techniques improved. From the turn of the century, the number of dispatched cards exploded. Europe was virtually flooded with picture postcards; metaphors like "an inundation" and "the letting out of waters" were used by the press, as well as terms like "influenza" and "pest." In 1903, a British paper predicted that within ten years Europe would be buried beneath postcards, as a result of the new "postcard cult." That year around 600 million postcards were dispatched in Great Britain alone. In Germany the number exceeded one billion, and the same quantity is reported from the USA. Japan lagged a bit behind, with only half a billion. England passed the billion-card mark in 1906. It is estimated that seven billion cards passed through the world's post offices in 1905 (Carline 1972; Ripert and Frère 1983).

These numbers do not include all the cards that were bought and put into albums—as souvenirs or as collectibles—without being mailed, during the Golden Age. The collecting zeal followed the same trend, and there is reason to believe that the number of cards bought but not mailed was not very much lower than the enormous numbers that were put in the mail. In 1900, *The Times* reported on this new collecting "mania," adding that it had not yet reached the same heights in Britain as it had in some other countries. Within less than a decade, however, the mania had spread all over the world—even if the picture postcard business in Africa and Asia was probably intended mainly for Western con-

sumption—a conclusion that is based on the fact that most picture postcards from these parts of the world are found in European and American markets and collections today (Geary and Webb 1998). Specialized postcard shops and exchange bourses grew up in most major western cities, but cards could be bought virtually everywhere.

The popularity of the picture postcard was due to several factors, which, analytically, can be sorted into the following four groups. In practice however, any card might fall into several of these categories:

- *The aesthetics of the card.* As a cheap pictorial item in a world where other colored pictures were still rare and expensive, the motif in itself was of high importance. The pictures gave visual pleasures, information about distant places and famous persons, opportunities for longing and dreaming, and pretexts for discussions in the family and conversations at social gatherings, as for example in the very common habit of keeping postcard albums for guests to look at. Postcard albums were the "coffee-table books" of the turn of the century (Rogan 1999) and the cards, with their colorful visual representation of the world, symbolized modernity at large.
- *The card as a souvenir.* The enormous number of all sorts of cards (apart from collections strictly speaking) secured for posterity

in chests and drawers, in recesses and attics, tells its own tale about the drive to uphold the memory of persons, places, and events. All the congratulations cards, but even more the large quantities of cards with local and tourist motifs, testify to their value as souvenirs—souvenirs of persons, of places where someone lived, of sites visited, or of travels undertaken.

- *The card as a collectible.* A new collecting vogue, that of picture postcards, swept over the Western world around 1900. The ordinary collector once more had access to a new, cheap, and ubiquitous pictorial item, as in the early days of stamp collecting. In the first years, collecting postcards was primarily if not exclusively the hobby of young girls and women. There were even collector clubs for ladies only. From around 1905 the men entered the scene and took over the clubs and the journals, which proliferated during the Golden Age.<sup>4</sup> Close reading of advertisements in British postcard journals confirms that in 1900 the great majority of collectors were women. A similar reading in 1906 shows that men had taken over, outnumbering the women by about five to one (Carline 1972, 66). However, albums that have survived and other scattered evidence indicate that postcard collecting on a more mod-

est scale remained a predominantly female activity (Rogan 1999, 2001a). Women collected motifs like views, landscapes, portraits, and works of art, but men started when more modern motifs appeared, like humorous cards, actresses and "posed beauties," ships, locomotives, and other tourist and transport topics. Serious postcard collecting (as opposed to other postal history collecting, i.e., stamps and philately) claimed aesthetic ideals rather than serial or taxonomic and scientific ones. In the collector's journals, the new, serious (male) collectors sharply criticized the old (female) practice of filling up albums haphazardly. The new (male) elite advocated specialization, the intelligent selection of beautiful or interesting cards, and annotated albums (Rogan 2001a, 2001b).

- *The card as a means of communication.* The driving force behind the postcard, from a postal history point of view, was the need for a practical, cheap, and quick medium for sending short, simple messages. Writing letters was for the elite, not for ordinary people, and for women more than for men. The telegraph, introduced in the 1860s, was until around World War I an expensive way of communicating, mostly used for business purposes. The resistance to open messages that anyone could read was strong—not



least in the upper class, letter-writing milieus, but also from postal authorities. It gradually diminished, however, from the 1870s on, steadily allowing more space on the postcards for the picture and the message.

The above factors—the cards as aesthetic objects, as souvenirs, as collectibles, and as a communication medium—may be termed the "pull" factors. To this should be added some "push" factors, i.e., the rapidly expanding postcard industry, the publishers, agents, and sellers, their advertising and efforts to sell their products.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Rise and Fall of an Industry**

The postcard industry became a big business that quickly created finely meshed, worldwide networks. It became a major economic sector, employing in France alone around 30,000 persons by 1900 (Schor 1992). However, Germany was the leading country for postcard production from late 19th century until around 1910. Hundreds of German companies, some with several factories, produced billions of cards every year. Some of the large postcard factories employed as many as fifteen hundred workers. About thirty of these German firms expanded into the international card market, producing cards with motifs from Norway to the Pacific. Pre-1910 North American postcards were produced mainly in Germany, as were most cards with motifs from the British Empire. Competition was fierce among the producers, and industrial espionage was common; secu-

rity became a major concern, with factory workers sworn to secrecy and visitors kept to a minimum. Each factory developed unique color formulas that were closely guarded as trade secrets and often protected by patents and trademark registration (Woody 1998).

As the types of cards grew more numerous, many firms specialized in products for the tourist industry (*Gruss aus-*, *Greetings from-*, *Souvenir de-*, *Hilsen fra-* cards, and later types), collector's sets, etc. With the economic potential in local view-cards, some German firms accepted millions of small contracts from local clients to document localities—thus creating a historical visual record that encompassed the world. Also, the development of small, inexpensive cameras permitted amateur photographers to make their own photographic postcards; smaller pictures were sent in with mail-order postcard contracts, rephotographed at the factories and conformed to the standard size of postcards—a practice that has been revitalized in the last decade.

The success of the German postcard industry in the early years of the 20th century was due partly to low labor costs but mainly to its hegemony in printing processes. After 1910, the skills of the German printing industry were dispersed when many young printers emigrated to Great Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. But towards World War I, the Golden Age of the postcard was approaching its end. The reasons are complex, but the war itself was a main factor: international as well as national tourism declined markedly, and industrial wartime production was directed

towards more essential, non-luxury objects. When peacetime trade resumed, most postcard companies were out of business. The reduced demand for postcards after the war was not only due to new communications media like the telegraph and the telephone. Another important factor was that the collecting mania was over or its focus had moved on to other items (Woody 1998).

If Germany was the leading postcard producer, British publishers were more active on the distribution side, importing cards from Germany and distributing them through their worldwide networks. As for aggressive advertising, the British postcard publishing company Raphael Tuck and Sons offers a case in point. When Tuck began publishing postcards in 1898–99, they launched a competition with big prizes to those who collected (or rather hoarded) the greatest number of their cards within the space of two years. Duplicates were accepted as long as they bore different postmarks. When the entries were judged, the first award went to a lady from Norwich who submitted over 20,000 cards. Another lady received a special award for a collection of over 2,000 cards from one single series. In a new competition in 1904, it was once again a lady who won the first prize for having collected over 25,000 Tuck's cards, but this time with a gentleman in second place. The enormous quantity of postcards produced, sent, collected, or simply kept created a serious problem: how to dispose of them. Among other things, the use of postcards for papering walls was advocated (as had been done fifty years earlier for postage stamps). In 1906, Tuck

made the disposal of postcards the subject of their third and largest competition, with the title "Home Decoration." Prizes were awarded for the best use of postcards for decorating tables, screens, cupboards, overmantles, etc. The first prize was given for a table mosaic, the second for a screen creation, the third for a decoration of bellows. All the prizewinners were ladies (Carline 1972, 64, 69).

There is not enough space here to discuss all the different types of cards that poured onto the market. Generally speaking, the earliest cards (the "pre-postals") were congratulations cards, then came topographical cards (tourist and local cards) and art reproductions, comic cards, erotic cards, and a long list of types of topical cards. What strikes an observer today is the way that types and functions crossed each other. There were for instance specialized seasonal greeting cards (for Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide, for birthdays, etc.), but a tourist card, a portrait, a summer scene, or a humor card could also serve as a Christmas or a New Year's card. During the Golden Age, every sort of card might be used for almost any purpose. It seems as if the message (however insignificant it might be, see below) was just as important as the motif and the occasion.

### **Topographical Cards: The Local Card and the Tourist Card**

Two of the most voluminous categories of postcards, to the extent that they may be distinguished from each other, were the local cards and the tourist cards. Local postcards depicted various themes of special interest or immediate importance



Tourists writing postcards in Stockholm, Sweden, 1909.

Photo: Anton Blomberg, Stockholm Stadsmuseum.

to local consumers, i.e., the inhabitants of a region, a town, or a village. Buildings, streets, markets and fairs, shops, or even the interiors of shops were typical motifs, as were activities of every sort on the local level. Factories, even small plants and workshops in the countryside or the village, were favorite themes. The small dairy factory, the local wine cooperative, the village vinegar or potato starch factory, and the local sulphur or bone meal factory were topics that abound in French collections, as do the school house, the first automobile in the village, the policeman, the postman, the milkman, etc. In Norwegian collections, harbors, scenes from fisheries and whaling, the canning industry, etc., play the same role. The variety of local cards is amazing, and there is hardly any village motif that has not served for a postcard.

These postcards were indeed often idiosyncratic in their depiction of local themes, as stated by Geary and Webb (1998, 2). A favorite local theme was

monumental buildings, among which churches and hospitals have a prominent position. One would perhaps think that motifs like mental asylums would be rather rare on postcards. However, Bogdan and Marshall (1995) have collected nearly 1,700 different postcard depictions of American mental asylums, and they believe these are only a fraction of the postcards produced with such motifs.

In this collection more than half the cards have never been mailed. Among the 47% that carry an inscription, less than the half comment upon this special motif. Even an asylum card could be used for a simple, everyday message or a sign of life. An even more special motif, seen with modern eyes, relates to the French experience of World War I. I have found in French postcard collections several depictions of crippled persons sitting in dog-drawn carts; the person depicted had had postcards made of themselves (by means of the mail-order system mentioned above), which they sold to earn a living. The inscriptions on all these local cards, to the extent that they have been mailed and not only bought as souvenirs or collectibles, seldom make mention of the pictorial theme.

In contrast to these locally idiosyncratic motifs stand the conventionalized and stereotypical motifs of the tourist cards. The tourist industry and early mass tourism from the late 19th century



onwards strongly influenced postcard production, and the postcard industry found one of its most profitable outlets in the emerging mass tourism. Typical motifs on these cards are landscape views, snowy mountains, waterfalls, fjords, glaciers, churches, cathedrals, castles, hotels and passenger ships, as well as folkloric themes like national costumes, folk dance scenes, peasants harvesting, etc. Cards could be bought in most kinds of shops, in libraries, in restaurants and railway stations, aboard steamers, from coachmen and street-corner vendors. Tourists are reported to have bought, written, and sent cards in large numbers, as an integral part of the travel experience. From reading travel accounts from the turn of the century, one gets the impression that the cards bought and sent were as important as the sites visited. A British tourist in Germany in 1900 reported that, "[y]ou enter the railway station, and everybody on the platform has a pencil in one hand and a postcard in the other. In the train it is the same thing. Your fellow travelers never speak. They have little piles of picture postcards on the seat beside them, and they write monotonously" (G.R. Sims qtd. in Carline 1972, 64).

We get the same impression from travel accounts from Norway, and especially from authors who participated in mass tourism cruises. From a hotel on the western coast in 1901, a German tourist wrote:

When I entered the hall with all the interesting Nordic wooden carvings, I found the room filled with people, who without exception sat writing.

And what did they write? Picture postcards!! Oh, scourge of all scourges in this century. Like a pest you have fallen over us, and you pursue us into the most desolate valley. No one is safe from you. You are capable of spoiling the most beautiful voyage, the most picturesque landscape, the most serene fjord, the highest lookout point. . . . And what does the tourist do, when your call wakes him up from his silent contemplation of nature? . . . He digs deep into his pocket, brings out his purse and buys, more or less grudgingly, 2, 4, 6, 10, or 20 postcards, according to the number of friends and family. Instead of enjoying the marvelous view of the landscape . . . the tourist sits down and with an unusable pencil scribbles some unreadable lines.

(Laverrenz 1901, 60–61, qtd. in Brudvik 2001)

This tourist's critique of modern times was more rhetorical than really felt, however, as he himself admitted having written and sent fifty-two cards at the last stop in a Norwegian harbor. His excuse was that this was a duty that one should not forget lest one run the risk of turning old friends to lifelong foes. On this occasion, he reports, every single passenger from the cruiser was standing on the road in front of the little local post office writing cards, using house walls, tree trunks, etc., as writing desks. Other tourists along the Norwegian coast relate the same story (Brudvik 2001). Cards could be bought on board and in all ports. Another German, who did a North Cape cruise in 1899, reports that the number of postcards sent from his ship came to

around 20,000—which meant an average of fifty cards for each of the four hundred passengers on board (Haffter 1900). Other tourists again report that the "floating postcard shop" often ran out of cards, just as several of the small, local post offices were emptied of stamps. In one case, a small post office in a desolate Norwegian fjord ran out of postage stamps when 6,000 cards were delivered from one single passenger steamer (Brosi 1906, 148). This is "the age of the picture postcard," an English cruise tourist concluded, adding that tourists no longer needed to remember the views and places visited—it was sufficient to bring home the postcards (Klinghammer 1903).

### The Collectible and the Gift

Dear Stanley, I am sending you this postcard. I hope you will like to put it in your postcard album. I hope you are well from your loving Auntie Nellie Rudgley.

(Message on a tourist card with motif from the western coast of Norway, sent in 1906 to England, on a "divided" card with room for longer messages)

"Have you got anything for me, please?" The postman smilingly discloses the contents of his sack to the girls, who beam with joy. "I got 17. How about you?" "Oh, only 15 . . ." Father grumbles something about postage costs and the poor postmen working doubly because of this idiotic collecting craze. But to no avail. . . . Soon after he finds himself eagerly



Postcard sent in 1900 from The Hague to Paris. As the other side of the card was reserved for stamp and address, any greeting or message had to be written on the picture side. The longer the message, the more detrimental to the picture. The inscription (quoted in the text) is about exchange: it confirms the reception of other cards, promises to send more cards, carrying cancellation marks from the depicted sites.

advising them on how to place the postcards in the albums.

(Reflections of an anonymous Norwegian girl, "Brevkort og Backfischer" 1903, 41–44)

The British tourist in Germany in 1900 (cited above) noted on his cruise down

the Rhine that at each stopping-place a waiter was sent ashore with a large consignment of cards for the post. He was astonished to learn that they were mostly addressed by the passengers to themselves in order to secure the appropriate postmark; collectors liked to have their postcards carry a cancelled stamp (Carline 1972, 64). In France, collectors could bring their cards to any post office and have them cancelled without sending them, whereas the British post office refused this concession, to the dismay of British collectors.

To have the correct cancellation was a main concern for tourists in Norway as well. From the ports where the steamships called, we have reports of thronging at the post offices, long queues, and sweating postmasters applying stamps and cancellations as fast as they could (Brudvik 2001). On their arrival at the North Cape, this practice would culminate. In 1897 a Danish tourist reported that the two hours passed on the plateau were spent writing cards. The visitors were allowed to have them cancelled there with a postmark stamp reading "Nordkapp," brought along from the ship, as there was actually no post office on the plateau. Then the cards were brought back to the ship and delivered to the nearest post office (Andræ 1919, 100). On a cruise on the German ship *Auguste Victoria* in 1899, one of the crew, who served as a "Postmaster," had to carry 4,000 cards up to the plateau of North Cape to have them cancelled there. "The poor man showed me his hand afterwards," a German tourist reported, "it was full of blisters from the stamping" (Haffter 1900, 53). A few years later, tour-

ists on the plateau found a postmark stamp and a stamp pad on a table on the plateau; they were now allowed to do it themselves for the price of ten cents a card (Lausberg 1912, 348).<sup>6</sup>

Why this fad for cancellation marks? There were probably two reasons. One was to authenticate the object, which was important to the collector, especially to the male collector focusing on postal items. The other reason was to authenticate the travel experience, i.e., the fact of having been to certain places, which was of importance to the souvenir gatherer and probably also to those tourists who wanted to impress family and friends at home (Belk 1997).

It is obvious that many of the cards were gifts to collectors or exchange items. If we turn to the inscriptions on the cards, phrases like "Sent with affection to swell your collection," "Add me to your collection," etc., are common. In the following (exceptionally) long inscription, the exchange aspect appears clearly:

Thank you a thousand times for the card from . . . and the two from Robinson that I received recently and gave me much pleasure. Two friends will be going to Rotterdam and Amsterdam for the Pentecost. I will profit from their journey by furnishing them with cards from those places, so they will carry cancellation marks from the towns they represent. I leave on the 9th for Bruxelles, from where I shall not forget you. [. . . greeting + signature]

(Postcard with local motif, sent in 1900 from The Hague to Paris. French inscription.)

The two following inscriptions show that it must have been common for tourists to take on commissions for collectors. In both cases the tone is formal and the polite *vous*-form is used; the receivers are not close acquaintances:

Madame, I hope that among the series of cards that I send you I will chance to find something that will bring you pleasure. I start by sending this old church in ancient gothic style [. . . Formal greeting and signature]

(Postcard with tourist motif, sent from Stavanger, Norway, to Paris in 1903. French inscription.)

Madame, I beg your pardon for my long delay in answering your latest cards, for which I will express my thanks. I will do my utmost to be more regular in my correspondence next time. [. . . greetings + signature]

(Postcard with tourist motif, sent in 1903 from Stavanger, Norway, to France. French inscription.)

There are many cards with similar inscriptions. In order to facilitate exchange quite a few postcard exchange clubs were established at regional as well as national and international levels. A French club founded in Nancy in 1900 with the special aim of promoting international exchange counted as many as 2,400 members in 1904 (Ripert and Frère 1983). The members exchanged both used and unused cards, but the clubs probably also served as contact centers for the type of exchange that the above

inscriptions represent. It was also common that collectors sent cards as "gifts" to themselves, as the Rhine tourist witnessed (above). A corresponding case, observed by Geary and Webb (1998, 8), was a French colonial civil servant who during the years 1900 to 1925 sent postcards to his parents back home, asking them to keep the cards for his future collection.

The proportion of cards intended primarily for collections, as exchange objects, or as gifts to others or to oneself, must have been high. In addition to cards like those cited above, where the inscriptions clearly disclose the collecting context, there are all the blank, unused cards we find in present-day collections. Moreover, many cards containing ordinary greetings were also essentially items of exchange between collectors. In collections of Golden Age cards that I have studied, with motifs from Norway (from one much visited fjord), from France (local cards from one *département*) and from Egypt (motifs from Alexandria), all collected in the 1980s and 1990s, I have found that the percentage of unused cards ranges from above 50 up to 70, with the highest percentage for tourist cards. Others confirm this result. In the collection of (local) asylum cards referred to above over half of the approximately 1,700 cards were unused (Bogdan and Marshall 1995).

Cards that are bought and kept unused are more likely to survive than used cards, so we cannot infer from these cases that more than half of the cards produced during the Golden Age were bought with the sole intention of keeping, rather than sending, them. However, knowing

the collecting fad of this period, which definitely included mailed cards (including, for example, those mailed in order to procure a cancellation), one may ask which is more amazing: that the percentage of *used* cards that have survived is so low, or that the percentage of *unused* cards is so high? My conclusion so far is that the card had an important function as a gift, whether it was in used and imperfect form or in unused, mint condition, whether it was a gift to other collectors or a gift to oneself. And—as rules

of reciprocity would have it—gifts to other persons entail gifts in return.<sup>7</sup>

### Back Page Becomes Front Page

In order to approach the inscriptions on the postcards, a brief account of the formal postal rules and the design of the postcard is necessary (Ulvestad 1988, Rogan 1999). The design of the card played a major role for the form and the length of the message, and consequently for its contents. From the 1870s to the 1890s the postcards went through sev-



Local card with a scene from the Main Street in Tromsø, Norway, sent by an English tourist in 1905. The card is of the old type; the recto or front side contains only the address of the receiver and the stamp. What we see is the verso or back side, with the picture and a small margin for messages—in this case only a signature. A sign of life, perhaps even meant for boasting, maybe also a collectible or an exchange object, but carrying no further information to the receiver.



eral phases, from the prepaid, pictureless stationery card, to cards with pictures and postage stamps.<sup>8</sup> From the late 1890s—the beginning of the Golden Age—the postcard's front side or recto (as it was called by the postal authorities) contained only the address of the receiver and the postage stamp, and the back side or verso was more or less covered by the picture. Messages were not allowed on the recto side, only on the verso—which they had to share with the picture. This meant that there was only room for very short messages (plus a signature), in a corner or on the margins, unless you wrote your message across the picture—the only solution for longer messages. This physical frame is important because it imposed limitations on the use of the card. The postcard could not serve as a medium for substantial messages, and overwriting the picture was not a good solution for the aesthete or the collector. Longer messages had to be sent by ordinary, closed letters.

The final phase started just after the turn of the century—in 1902 in Great Britain, 1903 in France, 1905 in Norway, 1907 in the USA—when the recto or address side was divided into two parts: one half for the address and the stamp, and the other half for the message, as on modern postcards. From then on, the picture was allowed to spread out on the whole of the verso. The authorities still stuck to the recto-verso terminology, but for the ordinary consumer the hierarchy between the two sides had been inverted; the back side had finally become the front side, and the address and the message were relegated to the back side. This left more room for writing, although the

space still allowed only fairly short messages. The picture postcard remained the perfect medium for short communications.

### Ritual Communication

Arrivé bon port [+ signature] (Tourist card from Egypt to France, 1904)

En ballade [+ signature] (Local card sent within France, 1908)

Je ne pourrais pas écrire avant 8 jours  
[no signature] (Tourist card from Norway to France, 1905)

The brevity of the inscriptions is striking. We shall have a look at the inscriptions of a few collections of cards from the Golden Age, all of them new collections gathered in recent years. Of a small special collection of thirty-six old tourist cards from Alexandria, only ten had been through the mail. The great majority of the mailed ones (eight out of ten) had extremely short inscriptions, like "Arrivé bon port," "Amical souvenir," "Bonne santé," "Remerciements," "Souvenir lointain," "Amical bonjour," "Salutation," or a signature only—even if some of these cards have a divided back with room for longer messages. Another small collection of tourist cards, from a Norwegian fjord, shows the same pattern: out of twenty-one old cards only eight had been mailed. Six of the eight cards had very short inscriptions, of the above type. Of the four long inscriptions in these two collections, two contain complaints of not having received return cards from the addressees ("Ns sommes étonnés de ne pas avoir de vous

nouvelles. Pas une seule carte"). That is, the mailed cards are either short signs of life or metatexts on communication. Of another series of forty cards, all sent in 1904 by a tourist in Norway and addressed to three different members of his family in Paris, thirty-two contain nothing but the signature, seven very short inscriptions, and one an inscription of about twenty words. A possible interpretation is that these forty cards are gifts to a collector, either himself or one of the family members back in Paris. All the same, these cards served as signs of life as well.

The above sample is small, but others confirm the result. Geary and Webb have examined two collections of cards sent from Africa to Europe (consisting, respectively, of thirty-four and thirty-five cards) and they observe that "[m]ost cards carry no message; three or four simply state that a longer letter had been delayed" (1998, 7). A contemporary observer, a German tourist in Norway, confirms these findings. He added the following remark to his observation of his fellow travelers writing cards on every possible occasion (quoted above): "Don't worry about writing too much. Your words are of no importance. The receiver does not want anything but the picture, whether it comes from the north, south, east, or west; it doesn't matter whether it's a phototype, a collotype, or a lithography. Most publishers are smart; they produce cards where you cannot write much more than your name. That's how much space there must be left for the cards to be bought . . ." (Laverrenz 1901, 61).

Local cards too might have short in-

scriptions (much shorter than the space demanded), as indicated by a study of cards from a French *département* (l'Ain), even if there is a higher number of longer inscriptions among these. What is striking, however, is the exchange aspect:

My dear Léontine, Thank you very much for the short message you sent me. I was pleased to have it. (+ signature)

My very dear little Annie, I hasten to answer your letter, which I received yesterday evening. I was very happy to have news from you. . . . (+ signature)

I received your card, which pleased me. . . . (+ signature)

Dear Father and Sister. I write you this short card to tell you that I have arrived well and to say hello to you. (+ signature)

There is something automatic and ritualistic about most of these inscriptions, whether they carry a signature only (in some cases not more than the initials) or a few words in addition. It is like a handshake or a simple phrase—"Good morning," "How do you do," or any other everyday ritual. These inscriptions are almost void of *information* but they are still *messages* with a strong expressive value.

Communication theory may shed some light on the function of these cards. In order to draw a clearer line between mass culture and popular culture, folkloristic theory has pointed to the distinction between messages that carry information and messages that are primarily activities in themselves (Eriksen 1989).

The first communication form is *linear*, with a sender, a receiver (or a group of receivers in the case of mass communication), and a piece of information of some sort, the intention being that one person or one group *informs* another person or another group. The second type has been described as *circular*, encompassing people who have a fairly close social relationship; the purpose of such communication acts being to *confirm* or mobilize an already existing social relationship; hence the term "activity-oriented" communication for the latter, as opposed to the first type, "information-oriented" communication.<sup>9</sup>

It has been pointed out that activity-oriented communication presupposes a clear set of common references and that the purpose is often merely to confirm these (Eriksen 1989). To make the message short and economical is one way of demonstrating this form of cultural competence. The aim is not to provide new information, but to refer to what is already shared; the most successful communication is the one that is least redundant. A postcard inscription like "Arrivé bon port" ("Arrived safe and sound") presupposes that the addressee knows that the sender has left on a journey and probably also most of the details of the itinerary. The same applies to all the cards with only a greeting—a "Bonjour," a "Salutations," an "Amical souvenir," etc. — or with nothing but a signature or a set of initials. Their information component may very often be reduced to that of a sign of life; they can be translated to a "Hello, I'm alive" and "I haven't forgotten you." They include a "Wish you were here," whether literally expressed or read

between the lines. Inscriptions like these do not transmit information external to the sender; they are more or less identical to the sender.<sup>10</sup> They are social tokens more than informative messages.

Whether the postcard contains a short inscription, a signature, or a set of initials, the redundancy—normally an important element when information is transferred—is reduced to a minimum. These are cards exchanged between people who know each other well and for whom the context is known.<sup>11</sup> No card is totally void of information; after all, they state that the sender is or was alive at the moment of mailing. But the main function is to keep up reciprocal social contacts ("reciprocal" communication is perhaps a more accurate term than "circular" in the case of postcards). In the same way, cards sent between collectors, with little or no text, also have this secondary, social function of keeping the network going, as if stating "I'm still interested in your collecting activity and I'll help you enhance your collection." Marshall McLuhan's old catchphrase, "the medium is the message," still seems valid for some types of communication.

Due to its predominantly social aim, the postcard may be viewed as a form of ritual communication. A ritual may be identified by three characteristics, namely repetition, institutionalization (the act must be familiar and predictable), and expressivity.<sup>12</sup> The last characteristic makes it possible to draw the line between rituals on the one hand and (utilitarian) habits and routines on the other. From the point of view of semiotics, the ritual act—e.g., sending a



Three typical tourist cards from the North Cape, dating from 1905 or earlier. The back sides contain nothing but address and stamp, as prescribed. One card carries a signature and a date only. The second is unsigned but has the following inscription: "Another for your collection; one J. V. gave me last night." The inscription on the third card is "We're alive. All well at home. Thanks for the card you sent me" plus signature. This means three signs of life, at least one exchange object and one metatext on communication.



postcard—may be seen as a signifier of some symbolic content: the signified (in our context, a sign of life or a confirmation of friendship). What makes a routine a ritual is when the expressive value (the signified) enters the foreground. The intention of the performer and the interpretation of the observer and receiver are the essential criteria in distinguishing a ritual from a routine. The postcard often has high expressive value. It represents a practical realm, that of messages and information exchange, but its informaa strong value of sociability: the mobile phone call and especially its text-messaging capacities (including the recent technology of transmitting visual or photographic messages). Its popularity was shown on New Year's Eve 1999, when—remarkably—the main Norwegian net operator registered three million text messages in a total population of four million. Recent research among young people aged between thirteen and twenty confirms the fundamental role played by text messages for keeping in touch and confirming social relationships (Johnsen 2000).

The mobile phone has two characteristics in common with the postcard (and which distinguish it from the ordinary, permanent telephone): it is a communication system based on *individual* access to the medium (you seldom share a mobile with others), and the text-messaging system allows communication *independently of time and place* (you can send a message from wherever you are at any time, day or night). The mobile, its text messaging capacity, and the omnipresent availability it offers are described by

young informants as essential for belonging to, and maintaining membership in, groups and networks. Just like the postcard message, the mobile text message is asynchronous (unlike the direct telephone conversation), and because space is limited, it is minimalist and non-redundant. It is used mainly to send short emotional messages (often coded, in personal variants, as postcard messages were also often sent in abbreviated form), jokes and gossip, or drawings; consequently it has little information value but a high expressive and symbolic value (Johnsen 2000). These rather non-essential messages (from a utilitarian point of view) require responses within a short time-frame, in accordance with the principle of gift giving and immediate reciprocity—unless you want to punish someone by demonstrating his non-belonging or to mark your own superiority. The text message may be said to have the same relation to a telephone conversation as a postcard does to a letter.

### **An Entangled Object**

Around 1900, the Western world experienced a craze for postcards, a fad that lasted two decades and spread to most of the world. There is a striking contrast between quantity and banality, i.e., between the enormous number of postcards produced and sold during the Golden Age (probably at least 200 or 300 billion cards) and the use of them, as we can infer from the considerable number of examples that have survived until the present. Half of the surviving cards are blank (not mailed) and a substantial proportion of the used (mailed) cards—for topographical motifs probably more



than the half—carry short, banal greetings or only the signature of the sender.

However, these cards served a multiplicity of uses and functions and they were enmeshed in a tangle of relationships. Aesthetic appreciation of the picture motifs lay behind the postcard's popularity in general (the symbolic and representational aspects of the images have not been treated in this article), and the aesthetic dimension certainly played a major role in its widespread use for greetings, in its function as a souvenir (including the role of the tourist card to authenticate the journey, and consequently as a status claimer), and in its enormous popularity as a collectible. For a short period, the picture postcard eclipsed the world's number one collectible, the postage stamp. The two latter uses—as a souvenir and as a collectible—are closely entangled, even if some theorists have seen them as separate functions (Stewart 1993).<sup>14</sup> These more or less enmeshed uses entrained the cards in a complex exchange and gift economy with reciprocity as a central principle.

But it was not only the imagery, or the card as a picture carrier, that counted. The card as a physical object had two sides. The exchange and gift economy of the card also included the inscriptions. According to classical gift theory, a gift cannot be understood as a property relationship to a material object, but must be seen as a function of a social relationship: a gift is an object that tells us something not about itself, but about the relationship between donor and receiver (Mauss 1923–1924).

Even if communication was the *raison d'être* of the picture postcards, they sel-

dom carried a substantial, linear message—i.e., new information—from the sender to the addressee. As a communication medium, the card carried messages more or less void of information; they served mainly as a sign of life and a reminder of social relationships. The picture postcard was predominantly a carrier of what has been termed "activity-oriented" communication, the purpose of which is to confirm, mobilize, or strengthen social relationships. This form of communication presupposes a set of common references and some shared knowledge. To confirm this was a main purpose of the cards. There was no room for redundancy: the shorter the messages, the more convincing the confirmation. For the cards to function as social glue, the exchange principle was immediate reciprocity.

For the first time in history, the picture postcard offered the opportunity of activity-oriented communication over long distances and on journeys, in a much easier and more efficient way than the closed letter. Today, e-mail messages fulfill the same function, to some extent; and mobile phone text messages to an even greater extent. The great difference, however, is that these modern electronic messages do not function as aesthetic objects, or as souvenirs, or as collectibles. What characterized the craze for the picture postcard a century ago and guaranteed its enormous spread and popularity was precisely these enmeshed functions, concrete as well as symbolic, and the many layers of meaning invested in the postcard. Few material items are more aptly characterized as "an entangled object" than the picture postcard

of the Golden Age. This humble material artefact was—to paraphrase T.S. Eliot—an emissary of the culture of the turn of the century.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper I gave at the 8th Interdisciplinary Conference on Research in Consumption, Paris, July 26–28, 2001. Translations of quotations and postcard inscriptions from Norwegian, French, and German are by the author. Thanks to professor Reg Byron for language revision. An earlier version of the Paris paper has appeared in Norwegian (Rogan 2002).

<sup>2</sup> No one has yet ventured to calculate the total number of postcards produced during the Golden Age. A rough estimate is possible, however, which departs from Carline's estimate of 7 billion cards passing the world's post offices in 1903. It is generally acknowledged that the craze culminated around 1912. Available statistics of dispatched cards from the Norwegian post authorities are as follows: 1879: 166,000 cards; 1900: 3,570,000; 1904: 8,831,000; 1905: 12,400,000; 1910: 17,040,000; 1920: 15,569,000; 1935: 8,912,000. The yearly average number of mailed cards between 1900 and 1920 is 11,500,000, or almost twice as high as the figures from 1903. In the international context, this translates to roughly 14 billion cards a year or more than 250 billion cards during this twenty-year period. If the proportion of unused/undispatched cards is estimated at 25% of all cards produced—probably a conservative estimate—the total number of postcards produced during the Golden Age may have surpassed 300 billion cards. However, Norway may not be the best index for such estimates, as the country lagged somewhat be-

hind in the first years of the century: in 1903/04 the British sent around fifteen cards per inhabitant (600 million cards for about 40 million inhabitants), the Swedes ten cards per inhabitant (48 million cards for ca. 5 million inhabitants), and the Norwegians less than four cards per inhabitant (ca. 9 million cards for ca. 2,4 million inhabitants). The rough estimate should perhaps be reduced to something between 200 and 300 billion cards.

<sup>3</sup> The same criticism may be leveled at other versions of (functional-pragmatic) discourse analysis of cards, like Jaffe 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Great Britain had six postcard journals during the early years of the century, most of them of the ephemeral sort, and France had sixteen. Similar journals flourished for a short period in many European countries, the USA, and South America. Few, if any, survived the Golden Age.

<sup>5</sup> The terms "push" and "pull" factors are borrowed from migration studies, where they are commonly used to explain the double motivation behind the decision to leave one's country in order to settle in another.

<sup>6</sup> An even more "authentic" way of canceling the cards on the North Cape cruises, according to popular rumor, was to let the midnight sun burn a hole in them by means of a magnifying glass (Lausberg 1912, 348, 410).

<sup>7</sup> To decide whether the unused cards were primarily travel souvenirs or primarily collectibles, it is necessary to have a look at *old* collections. Old collections are rare, however, as they have often been dispersed by later collectors.

<sup>8</sup> The picture postcard, as we know it from the beginning of its golden era, had two fore-runners, both of which were collectibles, one for (male) philatelists and the other for (female) card collectors. The first was the pre-

paid, pictureless stationery card that was introduced around 1870 by postal authorities, the other the (seasonal) greeting or congratulations card with a picture that had to be sent in a closed envelope. The stationery was originally a purely philatelic object. The second phase started when private, pictureless cards (i.e., not issued by postal authorities) with postage stamps were allowed by postal authorities in the 1880s, the third phase in the late 1880s when the authorities accepted a small vignette picture in one corner, and the fourth phase when the picture took over most of the back side of the card (the verso), leaving only a small place for the message. These transitions and the merging of the two collectibles into one took place at different times in different countries, but towards the end of the 1890s the postcard had become a collectible in its own right, and it was no longer a branch of philately.

<sup>9</sup> As pointed out by Eriksen (1989, note 2), this activity-oriented communication form corresponds closely to one of six functions that Roman Jakobson has ascribed to the (linear) communication act, namely its phatic function: "The phatic function is to keep the channels of communication open; it is to maintain the relationship between addresser and addressee: it is to confirm that communication is taking place."

<sup>10</sup> It may be added that from the point of view of performance theory the writing and sending of a card with a personal, handwritten inscription, even a stereotyped inscription or a signature only, mark the presence of the sender; the card represents personal presence and individuality. These theoretical arguments, however interesting, apply rather to contemporary contexts than to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when handwritten messages were the rule and printed ones the exception.

<sup>11</sup> If the context is missing, such messages may even function counter to the intention.

Some thirty years ago I received a postcard from my father with a minimal inscription (only "Hello, I'm fine"), sent from Hawaii. Living away from home myself, in another European country, I had not been in contact with him during the last month or so, and I got quite upset by the card. What on earth was he doing on the other side of the globe? As far as I knew, he had no business there, he could not afford a holiday like that, and it was totally unlike him to make a trip like that alone. It kept me up one night, wondering if he had gone nuts and left my mother and the rest of the family. From a phone call home the next day I learned that he had a professional mission there. But my lack of knowledge about the mission (as a hospital doctor he was sent to accompany a sick, disabled person back to Norway) and the totally unexpected card taught me a lesson about the function of postcards: If you don't know the context, a minimalist message does not work!

<sup>12</sup> See among others Rogan 2000 for a discussion of rituals. The stress on expressivity is borrowed from Edmund Leach 1968. See also Rothenbuhler 1998.

<sup>13</sup> See also Rothenbuhler 1998, 22–23, on ritual communication as communication without information. His text contains some interesting points of view, although he does not include the important social function that Eriksen (1989) discusses.

<sup>14</sup> While I appreciate Susan Stewart's (1993) arguments regarding the distinction between the souvenir and the collectible and her discussion of the one as a metonym (or rather a synecdoche) and the other as a metaphor, I disagree with her conclusion. A collectible always functions as a souvenir, and a souvenir may easily end up as a collectible.

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## Responses

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Dear Bjarne

Greetings from Liguria! I'm sitting in an airy hotel lobby in Italy, looking at a general store across the street. It has a couple of racks of postcards—you know, the stand-alone carousel type—and, in the two weeks that I've been here, not a single person has stopped to scrutinize the selection. You probably think I'm pretty sad, spending my entire vacation staring at a desolate postcard emporium, but I think it's kind of appropriate, since postcards are pretty sad too. Compared to the glorious heyday of deltiology, so cogently described in your article, picture postcards have come to a very sorry pass. Bypassed by email and cellphone text messages, they coagulate on rusty carousels outside rundown stores in fly-blown holiday resorts. How art the mighty fallen.

Actually, the sad fate of these mementoes to modernity makes me think of Martin Amis's novel, *The Information*, where he expounds on the slow but inexorable descent of the novel itself. Or its subject matter, rather. First it focused on gods, then demigods, then kings, then aristocrats, then merchants, then the working classes, then the criminal classes, and then, finally, the grubbier group of all, writers themselves. Amis, admittedly, owes this notion to Northrop Frye—his "theory of modes" in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, to be precise—nevertheless the degenerative tra-

jectory our latter-day anatomist describes is strikingly reminiscent of the retrogression of picture postcards. Recent books like Martin Parr's *Boring Postcards*, a "celebration" of the anodyne accomplishments of the once mighty genre, are surely the equivalent of Amis's final fatal stage, as indeed are scholarly articles on the subject. The surest signifier of a bankrupt cultural phenomenon is its academization, institutionalization, pantheonization (and the use of unnecessarily pretentious words to describe it).

Of course, I'm not referring to your wonderful article, Bjarne! I really enjoyed reading it. It's terrific, arresting, epochal. Whatever. You know, I actually thought I was reasonably familiar with the history of deltiology, until I read "An Entangled Object." I was particularly struck by your references to the gender divide in postcard collecting, if only because my own as yet unpublished research on the consumption of greeting cards shows that the gender divide is still there. Very much so. Gender equality may obtain in most walks of life—theoretically, at least—but not when it comes to buying and sending greeting cards. Men, in the main, have no time for that kind of thing. They consider it suspiciously unmanly. Women, by contrast, possess a carefully calibrated conception of who among their circle of acquaintances warrants a card, and the kind of card they're entitled to—hand-crafted, generic multi-pack, etc. (E-cards, incidentally, are totally unacceptable; sending one is tantamount to insulting the recipient.)

Okay, then, having scattered a few piastres of academic approbation and having taken the opportunity to trum-

pet my own learned endeavors, such as they are, convention demands that I temper my enthusiasm, qualify my comments, and generally demonstrate that I'm better read than you. Well, I'm afraid I can't temper, I won't qualify, and I'm not better. I like your article just the way it is.

That said, I'm a little bit surprised you don't mention how postcard-mania was just one among many consumer society crazes, or fads, at the outset of the twentieth century—bicycles, dolls, ragtime et al. Postcards may have been the craziest craze, I don't know for sure, but it definitely wasn't alone. Indeed, I've just finished reading David Lodge's latest novel, *Author, Author*, which discusses the "Trilby" fad that erupted in the wake of George du Maurier's eponymous best-seller, published in 1894. All manner of Trilby-related merchandise, from hats and socks to sausages and stage-plays, quickly flooded the market, much to the chagrin of du Maurier, who was at the center of the memorabilia maelstrom. His impecunious confidant, Henry James, wasn't best pleased either. But that's another story.

Secondly, you seem a tad surprised by the brevity of the written messages on the obverse of the cards you've studied. But surely we've known, since at least George Zipf's 1949 classic *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort*, that all sorts of social phenomena, communications included, exhibit a "power law" or Pareto-like effect. As Philip Ball explains in his recent book, *Critical Mass*, this effect is typified by a large number of short messages and a small number of long ones. I suspect this is as true of

emails and cellphone text messages as it is of postcards (the present "postcard" is an exception to the rule, naturally!).

It would have been nice, finally, if you'd said a little bit more about the transgressive side of postcards. It seems to me that there's always been a carnivalesque aspect to postcards, right from the earliest days and notwithstanding their latter-day elevation to the academic firmament. I'm thinking, for example, of the "tall tale" cards of the late-nineteenth century, which depicted grotesquely oversized farm animals and agricultural produce. I'm thinking of Gilroy's bawdy picture postcards, which were part and parcel of the English seaside resort "experience." They still are, to some extent. I'm thinking also of Jacques Derrida's *La Carte Postale*, which takes as its point of postmodern departure a bizarre postcard that Frère Jacques allegedly found in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

In fairness, Bjarne, you do mention the "sporting" side of postcards, the quasi-pornographic pictures that did so much to stimulate men's belated interest in collecting activities. I feel, however, that there's much more to be said on the subject. Postcards are usually bought in and sent from liminal locations, after all, and they unfailingly reflect their locale. Locales, in actual fact, like airy hotel lobbies in Liguria, Italy . . .

Wish you were here.

Ciao

*Stephen Brown*

Virginia-Lee Webb  
*The Metropolitan Museum of Art,*  
*New York, USA*

Bjarne Rogan's essay about picture postcards comes at a time when research on the subject is approaching a juncture. As the author summarizes, initial studies have been published giving an overview of the topic. In recent years the interest in picture postcards has moved from the sphere of collectors into an academic forum, emerging from the philatelic realm to produce a great deal of literature, both historical overviews and case studies. The majority of scholars have concentrated on postcards as commodity and object—how they were made, collected, purchased, sold, exchanged, and distributed to the different genders and to many classes of society. The photographic image itself has been a primary inspiration for much of the research, addressing the source and authorship of the photograph, contexts of its production, and the evolution of phrases and captions. This is especially true in case studies of postcards with images depicting non-western cultures formerly under colonial domination around the world. Issues to do with subjugation—blatant racism, pornography, violence, and the perpetuation of stereotypes—are the unsettling part of the discourse. Exchange, collecting, and key postal regulations have been addressed, some extensively. Therefore, the wide range of the publications about picture postcards referred to by Rogan is to be expected.

This research also parallels the increased investigation into the creation of photographic images, especially those

made by non-indigenous visitors from a variety of professions. Many of these postcard is about the image. Regardless of whether this small piece of paper was mailed or canceled at a postal facility or not, our understanding of the phenomenon is based on the relation of the image chosen by the sender for a specific recipient at a unique point in time. The transmission of emotion and information (either personal or emblematic) is initially reflected in the choice of picture or subject. Often, but not always, the words inscribed on the card emphasize, identify, contradict, or compliment the image—they refer to the pictorial component and have implications unique to the participants. The language and reception of the entire object is coded in very unique ways. It is acknowledged that the evolution of abbreviated inscriptions has been formed by space limitations and regulations of worldwide postal regulations, thus creating coded, stock phrases. Still, the verbal minutiae often refer to the picture.

Investigation into the complex form of communication embodied in picture postcards increasingly focuses on turning them over and acknowledging the messages written by senders. In this context, Rogan is correct in using as the point of departure for his analysis the premise that the picture postcard acts as "an emissary of its culture." The effectiveness of the postcard to communicate information or an idea through the representation of a place in a very specific image and format is powerful and concise. The conflation of pictorial formulae and standardized phrases may certainly serve as a vehicle for the transmission of percep-

tions about a particular culture. One might ask whose culture is transmitted—the one represented by the image or the sender? Probably both. It should be taken into account that a standardized rubric of communication through which the sender's position in the exchange is conveyed may have been used. Rogan notes specific phrases on postcards—"Sent with affection," "Add me to your collection"—that indicate the relationship between the recipient and sender.

As an object, the picture postcard is a vehicle that both represents and "carries" culture. As an arena of ritual communication it seems that context—once again—is everything. The interpretation of the length and type of message written by a sender on a card must always be interpreted in the entire context of the relationship between the two parties. The brevity or length of a specific message can be interpreted in a cyclical way to imply or anticipate a specific response, or, indeed, no response at all. Rogan describes cards with messages called "a sign of life" and calls them "social tokens more than informative messages." One could also take the alternative view that these cards do provide information about the state of the sender "alive," "well," "happy," and that therefore they are also informative.

However, they do seem to be outside of the exchange if they do not elicit a reply and if the recipient does not send a card back to the transient address, but keeps (or collects) the card. Alternatively, a deferred exchange may occur when the recipient waits until s/he is traveling and then reciprocates with a card to which, in turn, an immediate reply is not antici-

pated or expected. Other exchanges are unreciprocated, the addressee never traveling and sending a postcard in return. The play involved in these obligatory arrangements is not always inherent in the messages written on the cards. Rogan discusses the systems of exchange and reciprocity that postcards operate within and which are subject to complex networks of status and obligation. We see how the postcard as commodity had different values among its early collectors (canceled or not, inscribed or blank) and Rogan notes that it operates within a very distinct social system of communication. In addition to the theorists Rogan cites, it would be interesting to further unpack the picture postcard transaction within discussions of gifts and commodities. Discussions by Kopytoff, Appadurai, and others that Rogan notes come to mind. Postcards certainly operate within complex social, linguistic, and cultural structures that carry obligations and reflect the position of the writer, photographer, and recipient. How do the postcards navigate those systems and change along the way as they move from one location to another? Rogan's interesting article reminds us that there are indeed multiple avenues to investigate relating to the impact of these small pieces of paper that have been sent all over the world.

#### **Work Cited**

Kopytoff, Igor. 1986. The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Edited by Arjun Appadurai. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.