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A Brief History of Christmas Cards

The world's first known Christmas card appeared in London in 1843, when Sir Henry Cole hired painter and illustrator John Calcott Horsley to design a holiday card to send to his friends and acquaintances.

Courtesy Hallmark Cards Archives

This first Christmas card garnered little enthusiasm among the English. Some Puritans voiced their outright displeasure with the card's central illustration, which depicted the merriment of the season. Helping offset this criticism were the card's side panels, emphasizing the more charitable endeavors of clothing the poor and feeding the hungry. By 1860, objections to joyful holiday greetings had vanished, and the custom of sending Christmas cards was well established in Britain.

The American Christmas Card

Lithographer Louis Prang, a Prussian immigrant who started a small printing business near Boston in the late 1850s, is generally considered the father of the American Christmas Card. Prang published his first Christmas card for his American customers in 1875, a simple flower design with the words "Merry Christmas."

The popularity of Prang's Christmas cards with their fine color lithography was almost immediate. By 1881, he was reportedly printing five million cards a year. Although Prang's earliest cards included illustrations of flowers, birds and other subjects having little to do with Christmas, his later cards featured more traditional holiday designs, some of which were quite elaborate with silk trimmings.

Prang continued to publish his popular cards until the 1890s, when cheap imported postcards from Germany swamped the market and forced him to turn to other publishing ventures. The penny Christmas postcard remained popular in the U.S. until the outbreak of World War I, which effectively closed off the market from German imports, and spurred the birth of the American greeting card industry.

In the 1920s, American Christmas cards were typically handpainted and highly stylized, with many reflecting the Art Deco look. By the 1930s, holiday cards were starting to reflect the nation's social trends and concerns, from sentiments hinting at the impact of the Depression and Prohibition to designs from Hollywood's early animated cartoons. Patriotism and the hope for peace, as well as cards designed for servicemen stationed overseas, were among the most notable holiday card trends of the World War II era.

By the 1950s, Christmas cards had turned "modern," reflecting America's postwar interest in abstract art, the beat generation, cars, and the new medium of television. For the first time, humorous holiday cards took a measurable foothold in the United States.

Since then, the key social trends of each era have made their presence felt in America's Christmas cards. In the 1960s, holiday cards often featured psychedelic colors and peace symbols. With the 1970s came an interest in nostalgia, home and hearth. The 1980s saw more stylish and sophisticated imagery, with the emergence of the fitness craze resulting in cards featuring a notably slimmer Santa. Hightech themes and newage design defined many holiday cards of the 1990s.

With the onset of the 21st century, holiday cardsending has divided into two very broad categories: greeting cards that celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday, and secular cards celebrating the holiday season. Overall, the visual imagery of both secular and religious holiday cards has become more sophisticated, while the expressed sentiments have become more heartfelt, offering wishes for peace, harmony and joy throughout the season and the upcoming year.

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