

VILLAGE VIEW

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What do you suppose people did before Christmas cards were boxed and sold in stores? Christian societies celebrated the birth of Christ for centuries before an Englishman, Sir Henry Cole, came up with the idea of sending Christmas greeting cards in 1843 to relieve him of the tedium of hand-writing holiday greetings to the many patrons of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, of which he was director.

Before Sir Henry invented the first Christmas card, Christmas envelopes were available. These became popular as early as 1840, and the colorful folders contained handwritten greetings of the season.

Designed by Richard Doyle when he was 16 years old, the first Christmas envelope depicted a circular wreath-like emblem topped by an elf perched on a big Christmas pudding. In London's Stanley Gibbons Gallery can be seen a sample of Doyle's envelope as well as some oddments tucked inside to please the recipient.

Some of these curiosities were printed cutouts pasted on calling cards. No proper Victorian ventured outside his door without his visiting cards. While envelopes sufficed for most people, Sir Henry Cole felt he needed a more impressive enclosure.

This desire, coupled with his long list of names, a list too long to hand-write each greeting, sparked his idea of a printed card. Artist John Calcott was commissioned to design it; he came up with a family gathering surrounded by vignettes of charitable giving and toasts to good health.

The original print-run was for 1,000 lithographed and hand-colored cards; these Sir Henry mailed to his friends and patrons. Although the innovation met with ho-hum response, many who received them must have appreciated and preserved them, for samples can be found in English historical museums today.

Twenty years later, when an enterprising London printer ran an advertisement for "Christmas stationery," his postals came into wide demand. Contributing to their success was the British "penny post," which enabled anyone to mail a letter for one penny.

So popular did exchanging Christmas cards soon become that by 1879 the Postmaster General complained of problems in sorting the quantities mailed. And here are we, more than a century later, still following Sir Henry Cole's example.

In recent years, of course, the price of cards has escalated dramatically. Along with the increase in the cost of cards have come higher postage rates. U.S. Postal Service officials anticipate another rate-rise soon, to 25 cents an ounce for first class envelopes, and 15 cents for each postcard. Another

change has been in the paper stock the post office uses for the postals it sells. Previously manila, postals are now white. This change makes them more appropriate for greeting cards and eliminates entirely the cost of purchasing special greeting cards.

Possibly mass-produced cards, embossed, imprinted, and enclosed in envelopes, enhance the status of the sender, but a Christmas greeting is a Christmas greeting. The essential message is the same. Some people have discontinued mailing cards in favor of making a charitable contribution; others write Christmas letters using seasonally-decorated note paper. The postal card offers an imaginative alternative.

Anything made by hand embodies a personal touch; a hand-made Christmas card possesses, intrinsically, the spirit of its creator and is appreciated for that quality as well as for the time and effort involved.

Whether your personalized card bears a sketch, a block print, or a mimeographed original drawing, it serves to bring wishes for happiness and joy to friends far and near. There is still time to make your own card this year.

The first step, if you decide to use postals, is to choose a motif that will fit the card. As a guide, consider leaving a one-inch border at the top and on either side and, at the bottom, three inches of white space for your signature. Using a felt-tip pen with red or green ink may add a Christmassy note to your name.

In deciding on your design subject, choices are practically unlimited. A stained glass window, the simple lines of a beautifully proportioned church, tapering candles in a window, Christmas trees, snow scenes, tree decorations, holly and greens, animals or birds, fireplaces, Santas, candy canes; any of these might be your choice. Let your own imagination guide you and be as original as you like.

For those who feel limited in artistic talent, a simply-printed one-word greeting may be the best choice of all. "Noel" says it all, doesn't it?

Once a design is settled upon, you may find it helpful to cut a stencil, or more than one, to use for keeping your work uniform. Should you decide on the candle in the window, for instance, use the stencil of the window frame first, and that of the candle and its base, along with background, in a second step, after the ink, paint, watercolors, or whatever medium you use, has dried.

Or, if the one-word greeting seems best for you, consider a second stencil of a holly leaf to serve as your border. Trace it with a green-ink felt-tip pen, adding a bright red berry or two in the corners. Experiment with your design on 3 x 5 cards until you are satisfied with the results before beginning to work on the 13 cent postals.

There's no law against adding a short message above your name; that would make the card even more personal and of even greater value to its recipient.

A few hours of time can produce Christmas cards you will be proud to send, cards your loved ones will receive and display with pleasure. Your cards may even be saved as special mementos, just as were some of those Sir Henry Cole sent out, at Christmastime, 1843.