

Victorians exposed to fine art through Christmas cards

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Fig 1 shows Alice Havers, "A Christmas Greeting with Love," Hildesheimer & Faulkner, series no. 662. Signed on back, "Dear Effie. With Aunt Margarets' [sic] kind love." Havers won the first prize of £200 at Hildesheimer & Faulkner's 1881 competition. Credit: Peter Wadham

Designers of Christmas cards used fine art on their products to divert attention away from concerns that the festival was becoming too commercialised, a University of Exeter academic has found.

While heart-warming pictures of animals or festive decorations on Christmas [cards](#) may bring joy throughout December, few would consider these greetings to have great aesthetic merit. But Victorians were able to send each other Christmas cards created by respected artists, made to counter anxiety that growing consumerism was destroying sentiment.

Publishers also used high-quality artwork on the cards in a calculated way to find new customers for their products and to cater to an increasing variety of consumer tastes, Dr Patricia Zakreski, Lecturer in Victorian Literature and Culture at the University of Exeter, has found.

Her research paper, published in the *Journal of Design History*, is thought to be the first study to examine the functions of the Christmas card in the wider decorative [art](#) contexts of the period. Dr Zakreski examined rare cards held by a Devon-based private collector as part of her research.

Dr Zakreski, from the Department of English at the University's College of Humanities, said: "Between 1878 and 1888 Christmas card designers used fine art on their products to counter public concerns that the festival was becoming too commercialised. They were developed to bridge the boundary between the fine and decorative arts and bring lessons in art and aesthetic discernment to a mass middle-class public. The cards were affordable objects which satisfied public aesthetic demands.



Fig 2 -- This is De la Rue reproduction of J.C. Horsely's, 'A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You,' 1881. Credit: Peter Wadham

"By circulating in their millions during the Victorian era, Christmas cards brought with them into the wider public domain lessons in art that sought to inform the average, middle-class consumer of the aesthetic value of the decorative arts, teaching bewildered bourgeois suburbanites how to discriminate and how to find beauty in every object, however humble."

The Christmas card had been an increasingly popular means of exchanging seasonal greetings since at least the late 1860s, having first come into production in the 1840's as a means of raising money for charity. Industrial improvements and mechanical developments in the 1870's and 1880's made the mass printing of coloured designs cheaper and easier. As a result, the market for Christmas cards increased dramatically throughout the second half of the century. But this meant the connection between mass production and the card became more and more visible to the general public. Those who produced them began to be anxious that this could undermine the card's reason for existing and

put an end to the yearly sentimental ritual. Consequently there was an industry-wide initiative to use art and artists, both decorative and fine, to enhance commercial success.

Well-known illustrators such as Walter Crane, Randolph Caldecott and Kate Greenaway produced popular cards, as well as noted fine artists and members of the Royal Academy such as Henry Stacy Marks, John Callcott Horsley, Herbert Dicksee and William Frederick Yeames. Their work was praised by artistic journals at the time. In 1882 *The Magazine of Art* said: "These pictures, nevertheless—for such they were—could be considered as designs for Christmas cards only in a sense which would comprise any of the water-colour drawings in any exhibition", while *Punch* mocked them as: "too-too beautiful for anything except a glass-case and admiration; and, at the same time, about as appropriate to Christmas as strawberries and iced-cream".

The company Raphael Tuck & Sons began a "Royal Academy Series" in which they commissioned famous artists to produce designs for cards. It also held a Christmas card competition in 1880, inviting both professionals and amateurs to submit designs which could then be commissioned for publication. The firm De La Rue employed the services of the first director of Minton's Art Pottery Studio, William Stephen Coleman, and his sister Rebecca, a well-known decorative artist. Over the next few years a number of other publishers issued their own series of aesthetic cards, and similar competitions were held, offering more and bigger prizes.

Provided by University of Exeter

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