

Donation of the Month

Valentine's Day Cards

1994.44.3.2, Margaret Youngberg; 1996.42.2, Roberta Tucker





Valentine's Day is the day to give your loved one candy or flowers as well as a card to express your feelings for them. So, how did we get a day dedicated to love? Some say it honors the day St. Valentine was killed by a Roman Emperor for marrying people and others say it was an attempt to Christianize a pagan spring festival. No matter the reason, people have been celebrating a day of love with poetry and song for generations. The words were finally written down on cards and given to the object of affection beginning in the 15th Century. The Victorians took the day to new heights by displaying and collecting the cards. The tradition is still honored and begins very early with elementary age children handing out the cards to fellow class mates, even if they think Johnny or Sally has cooties.

Early cards were handmade with real lace, honeycomb paper, paper puffs, flowers, gold leaf, and ribbons. Often these cards were hand delivered or left on the porch as postage was expensive. By the mid-1800s cards were made in factories with paper lace. They also started being mailed as the post office offered penny posts. The next step was mechanical cards beginning in the 1840s. Mechanical cards featured pull tabs or other devices to make objects on the cards move.

The popularity of Valentines cards in America received a boost from Esther Howland in 1850. An artist and daughter of a stationary store owner, Esther was familiar with the cards. She decided to make some using real lace imported from Europe. To market her designs she gave a few samples to her brother to carry with him. They were so popular she had too many to make on her own, so she enlisted friends and

family to help her assemble the cards. Using the assembly line philosophy, Esther Howland had no problem making the orders. She turned her small operation into a business, which she ran until 1881.

As the second largest day for mail carriers, Valentines cards continue their popularity. Whether homemade or purchased at the store, one spends quite a bit of time finding the best poem to express their love. So as you reach for the perfect card remember the long tradition; and don't be surprised if the one you send it to keeps it for many years.