

The Postcard's Radical Openness

*A Philosophical Perspective of its Inception,
Impact, and Traits*

By

Mariluz Restrepo

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Inception, Impact, and Traits**

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This book first published 2024

Ethics International Press Ltd, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Print Book ISBN: 978-1-80441-515-3

eBook ISBN: 978-1-80441-516-0

... a threshold, a door, a becoming...
G. Deleuze

In memoriam
J.M. Restrepo-Millán, my father
Jean-Luc Nancy, my muse

To my daughters and grandchildren

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Table 1. Amounts of postcards sold once approved

Acknowledgments

My appreciation and gratitude to:

Diane Davis, for unpacking Derrida and for always being encouraging and supportive of my digressions with care, approving smiles, and wine cheers.

Catalina González, for our insightful friendship, our multi-layered conversations, your transgressing views, and your attentive reading and input to my writings.

Carolina Guzmán-Restrepo, for your intense sensitivity and creative gaze, for being my design partner turning ideas into engaging visual forms, and for sharing time with me and making me laugh.

Veronica Guzmán-Restrepo, for trusting me, being here despite the distance, and for sharing your Casa Verde-Azul and my nipoti who embody pure love and hope.

Herbert (Tico) Brown, for your revision of my initial writings of this book, our CNG memories, and our many heartfelt worldly discussions.

Jean-Luc Nancy, whose words touched souls and opened ways to feel, think, and imagine, all very much alive in your absence.

EGS, the finest thinking-feeling retreat ever; to the many professors who showed new paths through a variety of topics and styles.

The Editors of Ethics International Press for their assistance, professionalism, and care in making this book come to light.

Methodology remarks

The word ‘*postcard*’ –written as one word– is the choice employed unless other forms are part of quotes, or when there is a need to place the words ‘post card’ and ‘postal card’ as historical / geographical references. The expression ‘cards-to-post’ is my choice to explicitly convey what the phrase implies.

Historic information is the result of my gathering and weaving from many sources and corroborating data with primary ones when available; consequently, only quoted or paraphrased texts from a specific source are cited and, when appropriate, available links to more detailed information are added.

Exact *dates* are included if they are part of a quote, if they coincide in at least two trustworthy sources, or if they correspond to patent registrations; otherwise, *c.* [*circa*] is placed before the date.

Definitions and etymologies are the result of recomposing from my research in the following dictionaries:

Breve Diccionario Etimológico de la Lengua Castellana, Corominas (Gredos, 1990)

Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (RAE, 2017 ff.)

Diccionario Etimológico Indoeuropeo de la Lengua Española, Roberts and Pastor (Alianza, 1997)

Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins. (2010)

Raíces griegas y latinas. Tomás Cadavid Restrepo (1942)

Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases. (Spottiswoode, Ballantyne & Co. Ltd., 1910)

The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots (Houghton Mifflin, 2000)

Totius Latinitatis Lexicon. 4 Vol. Ægidii Forcellini (1805)

Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language. (1926)

Biographical data was taken from *Encyclopedia Britannica* unless otherwise specified.

Emphasized words in quotes are from the source unless otherwise noted.

Translations into English from texts in other languages are mine, and those are included in square brackets.

Postcard samples. This book is not focused on a postcard collection; however, to illustrate some of the ideas exposed, it mostly uses the *J.M. Restrepo-Millán Collection* (Bogotá, Colombia) composed of 2,250 postcards from 69 countries and 28 colonies, most of them dated from 1903 to 1922. In 2020, my daughters and I donated the collection to the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango – BLAA (Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia). In the book, it is referred to as J.M. Restrepo-Millán Collection-BLAA (Bogotá, Colombia).

The *postcard samples* are numbered consecutively, and the corresponding number is placed in parentheses within the text. Postcards are smaller than the actual size unless otherwise indicated. The sources of postcards not belonging to the J.M. Restrepo-Millán Collection-BLAA are included in the List of Figures.

Public domain. All of the postcards included as well as the two reproductions of G. Klimt's *Nuda Veritas* (1898 & 1899) are in the public domain because their copyright has expired, complying with the following directives:

- "U.S. Copyright law is complicated and nuanced, but as a rule of thumb it is safe to assume that works created and published in the United States before 1923 are in the public domain." (http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/copy_and_perms.pdf)
- In Australia and the European Union "copyright extends for the life of the author plus 70 years." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyright_Duration_Directive)
- "A few countries have copyright terms longer than 70 years: Mexico has 100 years, Colombia has 80 years, and Guatemala and Samoa have 75 years, Russia has 74 years for some authors." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_domain)

Aperture: Opening Up the Postcard

The postcard, a seemingly irrelevant small rectangle of thin cardboard carrier of visual and written missives, has captivated young and old, women and men, the opulent and the humble in almost every corner of the Earth since the last decades of the 19th century. Although today the postcard may seem rather *démodé* to some people, it still makes part of our lives. Who hasn't sent a postcard, kept one as a souvenir, or admired some from years past? Who hasn't referred to the postcard size as a generic format, or described a view to be 'like a postcard' because it seemed almost too perfect to be real? It could be that the postcard is taken for granted, or it may be that its somehow irresistible qualities become an intriguing and inspiring bait calling for possible responses that may lead to unsuspected ways of grasping some of our particular modes of being in the world.

From the last decade of the 19th century until the First World War, the postcard was the most popular, inexpensive, and efficient medium of communication, as well as a precious artifact, cared for, displayed, and exchanged by millions of people. Postcards depicting every imaginable topic were available in most countries including the colonies of Western imperial nations. They were not only used as greetings when traveling, but also to send get-well wishes, congratulations, and invitations, and to transmit business requests, invoices, and advertisements. Furthermore, postcards were employed to commemorate special occasions and to register accidents and natural disasters such as shipwrecks, plane crashes, fires, floods, and earthquakes. They were displayed on shop windows as decorations, exhibited in waiting areas for the enjoyment of clients and visitors, included as tokens in merchandise boxes, given as rewards in schools, and used as part of fundraising campaigns. Postcards were carefully preserved in albums, shared with families and friends, and exchanged worldwide. Collecting postcards became a gratifying pastime, giving way to collector clubs, magazines, and national and international exhibitions. Every month, millions of postcards were published, sold, posted, and kept by numerous people around the world. For example, in Germany, in Great Britain, and in the United States, mailed

postcards reached a billion per year, as it was registered in the official postal data of the time. Postcards impregnated everyday life at the turn of the 20th century, giving form to novel modes of communication and entertainment. They reached people everywhere, both exposing and influencing their ways of feeling, thinking, and acting; a global phenomenon indeed, somewhat comparable to the multiple uses of contemporary networking.

The overwhelming attraction and massive use of postcards during the last years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century –known as its Golden Age– certainly makes us ponder their enchantment, beyond what may be depicted on them. Postcards had been in the back of my mind for years suspecting somehow that there was much more in them than just nice views of a variety of places, objects, activities, and people from around the world. A small English oak inlaid chest containing numerous white envelopes, each marked with a country's name and filled with postcards had been in my home ever since I can remember. My father –a prominent Colombian scholar who died when I was a child– exchanged postcards when he was a teenager during the first decades of the 20th century, as he claimed, “to broaden my horizons closed-in by the mountains surrounding Bogotá.” Over the years, I browsed through his collection of more than two thousand postcards, dating from 1903 to 1922, with pictures referring to 693 locations from 97 countries of which 28 were from the Western colonies. This is one of those few collections kept intact from the time of the postcard's Golden Age.¹ Although many times I had used the postcards for different projects, shared them with my two daughters, and even thought about making a mural to exhibit a few of them, only recently did the time come to look closely into them from a philosophical stance, not to analyze the collection but rather to use it as a research corpus to better comprehend what the postcard is and its implications.

What brought me close to the postcard was not just the interest in what it portrays through pictures and words –which has been done profusely and, certainly, is quite interesting and instructive– but, most significantly, my keen

1 The J.M. Restrepo-Millán Postcard Collection is now housed at the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango - BLAA (Bogotá, Colombia) to whom our family donated it in 2020. Postcards from this collection inspire and illustrate topics in the book.

desire is to look deep inside the postcard to see what this double-sided open card entails. Further than reviewing what the postcard shows, my interest is focused on the search for a better comprehension of what the postcard is as such, how it does what it does, and how it has affected our existence. Inspired by the Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, I have adapted two questions he posed about the significance and effect of literature² to guide my quest: What does the postcard expose that had not been exposed in any other way? and What has been the contribution of the postcard that no other medium has done? In other words: What is entailed in a postcard, how does it perform, and what has been its specific impact on our human ways of being in the world? Hence, this book is centered on studying, from a holistic perspective, the postcard's particular way of being and performing, a particular ontology that opens up what is constitutively implicated in such a seemingly trivial artifact.

As odd as it may now seem to us, the coming into public existence of the postcard was a deeply controversial issue that required years of political activism, proposals, debates, and lobbying in various countries before these special cards were pronounced to exist. Its open format to be posted unenveloped was a concern to many because it challenged social and moral protocols of privacy and decency. Additionally, it appeared to be a risky innovation that did not seem profitable for the postal departments. While civilian advocates found them to be beneficial, especially to the common people, the cultural transformations in communication modes and writing practices that the postcard could bring about were not seen with good eyes by most governments. A double-face logic appears to be rooted in the postcard's constitution and its way of being.

Austria was the first country to officially authorize, in 1869, what was named as 'Correspondence Card' for the exclusive use of the postal offices. Although various countries soon followed the Austrian example, several others were reticent to approve these postal cards. The first cards were not as we know

2 Carlos Fuentes, in the conclusion to *Valiente mundo nuevo: épica, utopía y mito en la novela hispanoamericana*, (1990). [Brave New World: Epic, Utopia, and Myth in the Hispanic American Novel], poses the following questions: "¿Qué puede decir la literatura que no puede decirse de ninguna otra manera? Y ¿qué aporta la literatura que ningún otro medio puede aportar?" (286) [What can literature say that cannot be said any other way? And, what is the contribution of literature that no other medium can do?]

them today, for they had no pictures: the front was reserved for the address and a pre-printed stamp, and the back was left blank to be used for brief written messages. These cards-to-post seemed to have been long awaited by the people: wherever authorized, their success was immediate. Yet, decades of discussions had to take place before postcards were of common use worldwide. Years passed before their private production was authorized, and many years more elapsed before the card was turned into a picture postcard with the format we know today: the front for the picture and the back split in half, leaving the left side for the message and the right side for the address and the stamp. The postcard was the result of a public-private wrestling that contributed to blur the boundaries between these two realms.

The political dimension involved in the constitution and evolving of the postcard is accounted for in Part I. (*Politikos* - Πολιτικός) COMING FORTH: "NEW MOVES IN AN OLD GAME". It is not merely a reconstruction of chronological facts nor is it centered in one country or another but, most relevantly, it is a thorough reading into some of the postcard's stories and variations to reflect on their political and ethical implications that may shed light on our present. It is a type of philosophical archeology that, as Giorgio Agamben explains:

"Rather than searching for the origins, it focuses on the moment of arising ... not to restore a previous stage, but to decompose, displace, and ultimately bypass it to go back not to its content but to the modalities, circumstances and moments in which the split, by means of repression, constituted it as origin." (2009, 102 & 103)

The arising of the postcard, as I see it, borrowing J-F. Lyotard's terminology in *Just Gaming* (1989), was a 'game' with three masterstrokes that changed the rules of the game and, by doing so, inaugurated a novel mode of communication and also contributed to redefining State-private relations. This gaming between civil initiatives and the power of the State reveals a common silent thread that involved pronouncing, controlling, and making concessions by official authorities, which were compelled by private initiatives.

The authorization to privately produce postcards meant the end of the official monopoly and the growth of the graphic industry that found postcard production to be a lucrative business. The postcard trade, comprising transnational firms as well as local entrepreneurs, became a major economic sector with national and international impact. By adding pictures to the cards, reproducing them massively, and selling them globally, the postcard trade made of the postcard a picture industry. Postcards were sold in department stores, hotels, cafés, bookstores, tobacco stands, and in almost any corner store; postcards were even carried from place to place by postmen who had them ready to be written and immediately mailed. Never before had so many topics been pictured and made easily available to most everyone around the globe. The trade encompassed artistic production and crafts/wo/manship, technological reproducibility, sophisticated capitalist business practices, and merchandising methods.

Part II. (*Tekhné* - τέχνη), THE POSTCARD TRADE: A WORLDWIDE PICTURE INDUSTRY looks at the postcard from a technical point of view in its Greek sense of “know-how,” of practical doings, closely related to craft and art. It examines the peculiarities of the postcard trade –its know-how– with a novel approach that helps bring to light the immense influence of postcards by pointing out how the production of picture postcards involved art, technicity, and business which contributed to inform other ways of doing things. The reproduction of images on postcards, whether pictorial work or photography, was made possible by the emerging photomechanical techniques and, in turn, postcards are accountable for inducing technical innovations to make their production more efficient and, additionally, to enhance their quality. The postcard’s complex worldwide distribution networks and persuasive sales strategies backed by innovative business practices are precursors of modern management and marketing processes.

The picture postcard’s extraordinary success at the turn of the 20th century is not only indebted to the trade’s strategies, but also to how people perceived these open cards, appropriated them, and responded by broadening their communication scope and introducing new uses that have contributed to their unique attraction, even today. Postcards appealed to many, not just

tourists, as it has often been simplified. They were amply used to establish contact with others, whether for personal or business matters; they were employed in a variety of ways such as invitations, gifts, and decorations; they were part of advertising and propaganda campaigns; and they were kept as souvenirs and made into a favorite pastime when collected, exchanged, and exhibited. Moreover, they inspired the work of writers and artists by using them or emulating their style, as it still happens today. Postcards were publicly praised for being an educational device, for expanding interchange, and for picturing the world for the future. Concurrently, they were harshly mocked and criticized for their omnipresence which could hinder personal relations as well as cultural and moral values. This is comparable to the long-existing concerns related to other communication technologies such as what occurred with the appearance of writing, more recently with radio and television, and, presently, with social media and artificial intelligence, among others.

The picture postcard gave way to the explosion of a variety of pictorial styles, the liberation of art forms, and the valuing of national and regional topics. The postcard became an ideal medium for photographers. Photography, which had been mainly of portraits, expanded to portraying anything available that could be of interest to the innumerable postcard users. The picture postcard popularized photography and prompted the advent of photographic genres, such as tourist-travel photography, documentary photography, and photojournalism.

The ways of perceiving and the sensitivity of the time that influenced the postcard's alluring reception, which also may help explain their continuous attraction, are addressed in Part III. (*Aisthetikos* - αισθητικός) AN ALLURING ARTIFACT: EMERGING SENSITIVITIES. An aesthetic perspective, understood in its archaic sense of perceiving, led to my attentive inspection of the reception of the postcard manifested in its multiple uses and the reactions prompted by social practices, as well as looking into certain postcard features that uniquely exceeded their own time.

On the one hand, the postcard's perception, translated into everyday practices, counteracted the strategic commercial procedures by reconfiguring the postcard into a multilayered artifact of symbolic relevance, not merely a

consumer good nor a simple and efficient vehicle with pictures to send brief messages. On the other hand, the postcard reflects sensitivities of the time while transgressing them, what I qualify as a postmodern manifestation –in Lyotard’s sense–, not only being exponents of modernity, as postcards have commonly been described. The need for the users to intervene the card for it to become what it was intended to be –a picture card to be posted– implies the direct involvement of its users in its sense-making process. This exigency of intervention differentiates the postcard from other communication media, which only recently has found its continuity in the various digital formats that compel users to participate in the configuration of messages. The postcard’s variety of uses traversed class, ethnicity, age, and gender barriers and its ability to reach groups normally not involved in social interchange exemplify new modes of democratization now echoed in contemporary issues of inclusion. The involvement of women as postcard users, collectors, and workers in the trade was prominent. The evolving urban character –with increased public spaces, new mobility patterns, more leisure time, and public exposure of people and things– is ingrained in the postcard’s configuration and uses. Those nascent sensitivities exposed by the postcard add to understanding its desirability and magnetism that have been kept alive with different intensities throughout its adjustments over time.

While the first three parts of this book refer to an extensive approach to the postcard by studying its characteristics and contributions referred to external factors, Part IV. (*Ethos* - ἦθος) COMMUNICABILITY: A RELATIONAL ETHICS presents an intensive examination of the postcard as such, of its constituent traits that define its communicative character, which metaphorically may be understood as its *ethos*. A meticulous analysis of what is entailed in the card itself, in their being posted, and in keeping and collecting them discloses the postcard’s communicability. This double-sided open card is a unique form of interactive multimedia intrinsically combining mass-produced pictures with personal hand-written missives that, in their co-relation, enrich each other, intersecting the public and the private spheres. The card format inaugurated a perceptive space, opening the way to other forms of looking and to new pictorial and writing styles; and, because the card is open, what is consigned on it, covering it, is also exposed, open to everyone’s view. Posting the card

requires choosing and addressing it; that is, having someone in mind to make contact, not necessarily expecting an answer. Sending a postcard may be seen as a goodwill response to the other's existence, what I suggest to be an act of deference, an ethical-rhetorical gesture posing an open attitude toward the other. When received, the postcard, puts the gap between the sender and the addressee into play, placing them 'in relation' while 'relating' stories to which both can 'relate', stories that remain open to infinite significations. Through postcards memories are recalled, and when those are collected, they become valuable records, a type of archive that images past events for viewers-readers to inhabit them imaginatively, opening the way to multiple interpretations.

One may say that the postcard's main quality, its excellence, is a radical openness that exposes the aperture of truth. Truth was a concern of certain art movements at the time of the postcard's Golden Age, which decades later finds ontological grounding in Heidegger's discussion of *alētheia* — unconcealedness. To conclude this book without ever closing it, but rather leaving the way open to continue caring for these very special cards, the last section shows the postcard's unique form of openness in relation to "Nuda Veritas," two artworks by Gustav Klimt from 1898 and 1899, which I find exemplary of the uncovering of truth. Both in the postcard and in Klimt's paintings, fundamental veiling-unveiling, that is, concealment-unconcealment is manifested by *vera nuditas* exposing *nuda veritas*: impossible nudity, infinite open sense.

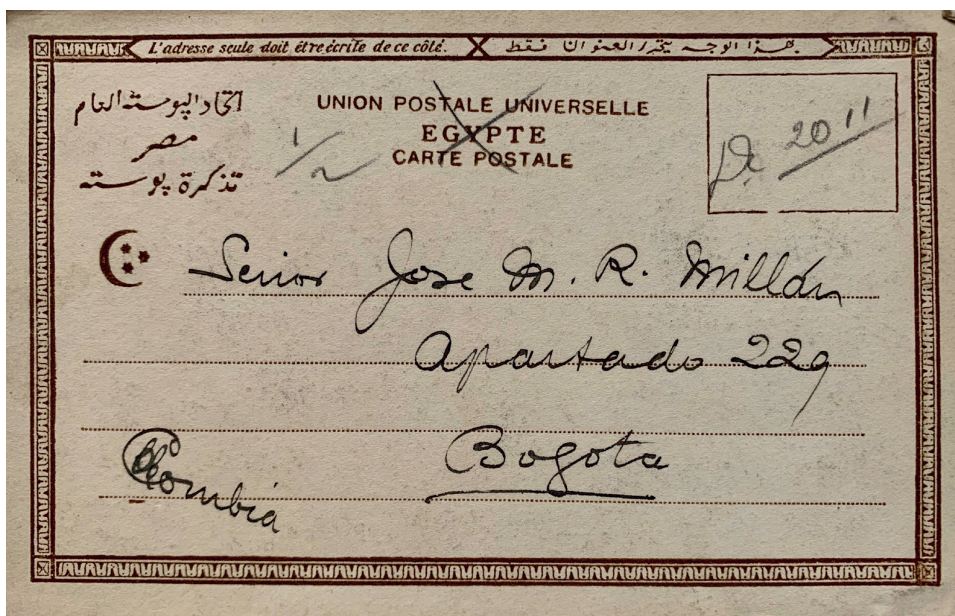
The postcard, an official inexpensive and efficient open card to send brief messages; a picture postcard industry prompted by commercial strategies; a multilayered product reconfigured by its users; an exponent of nascent sensitivities; a traverser of gender, race, age, class distinctions, and public-private realms; an archive of diverse ways of looking, feeling, and living; a sparkler of memories and imagination; an interactive multimedia artifact; a response to another's existence; a text-image storyteller... the postcard is both an opener of newness and an open mode of endless possibilities of making sense of our being in the world. Through its practical and unpretentious way, the postcard's radical openness makes patent the aperture of truth.

Part I.

Politikos - Πολιτικός

COMING FORTH:

“NEW MOVES IN AN OLD GAME”



Undivided-Back Postcard. 1912

The postcard's double-sidedness mirrors what was at stake in its formation and evolution as it reflects the processes that had to take place for these cards to be acknowledged, authorized, and used massively. On the one side, the optimistic prospects of innovation and change that cards-to-post could bring about; and on the other, the fear over those very changes with their negative outcomes; and in between –in being two– the co-habitation of both sides embedded in its configuration. The appearance of the postcard, its coming-to-existence –its becoming– was a motive of strenuous political discussions; it was a controversial issue that required the advocacy and creativity of citizens in various countries for the postcard to be officially constituted and instituted. Decades of political activism took place for the postcard to be approved worldwide; then, to be privately produced; and yet later to be transformed into cards with pictures, as we still know them today.

After several unsuccessful design intents and failed proposals for the official acceptance of postal open cards, finally in 1869, The Austro-Hungarian Empire decreed the birth of the correspondence card –*Correspondenz Karte*. These cards, ready to write on them and be posted, had a pre-printed stamp with ample space for the address on the front, and their backs were left blank for users to inscribe a brief message. Although several countries soon followed the Austrian example, others were reticent to consent to cards being mailed without envelopes and, even when authorized as a product of the post offices, their private production was not yet allowed.

The coming-to-be of the postcard during the second half of the 19th century and its overwhelming admittance into everyday life at the beginning of the 20th century were the outcome of disputes between control and innovation, of disagreements between conventionalism and libertarianism, of arguments favoring either resistance to change or consenting to take risks. It was a political struggle, a game of power between States and citizens, a quarrel between government and industry in which service and profit, practicality and set social manners, efficiency and pleasure, obedience and imagination were put into play. This game was, above all, a game to establish the rules of

the game, a regulatory game within the language game of the accepted ways of communication at the time.¹

Three moves, three masterstrokes, may be acknowledged within the political public-private game when taking into account how different countries were involved in the appearance and rise of the postcard. Each move, shaped in a different country and for a different reason, contributed to the worldwide establishment of cards-to-post and to their transformation into what is named and recognized as a postcard up to date. First, the move by which postcards were pronounced to be so; second, the move that authorized and controlled their private production; and third, the move induced by a commercial vision and by the postcard's everyday use that led to its inversion placing the picture on the front side, thus, turning what had been decreed to be the verso into the recto—until then, the message and the picture had to be placed on the back of the card. These masterstrokes within the citizen-government wrestling were “new moves in an old game” (Lyotard 1989, 61) that changed the rules of the game and, by doing so, changed the game. As Lyotard states:

“The point is not that one keeps the games, but that, in each of the existing games, one effects new moves, one opens up the possibility of new efficacies in the games with the present rules: one can play a given game with other rules, and when one changes the rules, one has changed the game, because a game is primarily defined by its rules. And here again, it is a problem of inventiveness in language games” (1989, 62).

One may say that a new game, the one of ‘the postcard’, was established within the realm of communicative practices.

1 This game approach employed to explain the coming-to-be of the postcard is borrowed from Jean François Lyotard's use of Wittgenstein's notion of ‘language games’ during his ongoing conversation with Jean-Loup Thébaud in *Just Gaming*, 1989 (*Au juste*, 1979).

The Appearance of Postcards: Citizen-Government Wrestling

Postcard Traces

If the postcard's main feature were that of being a small picture that conveys messages, as it is most commonly recognized today, its seeds may be traced back to pre-historic times and found in carved rocks with some type of inscription or in small cave paintings assumed to have a communicative intention. Other possible ancient sources may be found in clay tablets of the Bronze Age or in the illuminations that adorned manuscripts of the Middle Ages. But, if the use of images in formal correspondence were what typifies a postcard, their closer ancestor may be traced back to handmade illustrations, usually of flowers and leaves, added to letters that were sent most commonly while traveling, a common practice during the 18th century mainly in France and Italy, or they could be referred to the 19th century illustrated stationery which included patriotic emblems on government paper, adorned letterheads on business correspondence, panoramic views of harbors, streets, and seaside views on writing paper and envelopes that, by then, were of common use.

The earliest postcards named as such had no illustrations. They were plain small rectangular pieces of paper, somewhat thicker than the usual stationery, with an imprinted stamp, a few informative inscriptions, occasionally including the code of arms of the country that issued them, and frequently framed with a decorative vignette. Thus, if what typically characterizes a postcard were its size and the material of what it is made –a type of stiff paper to write on, from which the word ‘card’ derives– as well as the fact that part of it is printed, then its roots may probably be found some time during the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD in China, as a result of papermaking and printing, two of Chinese well recognized inventions that slowly spread to the Islamic world and medieval Europe.¹ Some traces of the use of small

¹ Those inventions, together with gunpowder and the compass, have usually been considered exemplary of China's early development in applied sciences.

rectangular pieces of stiff paper with illustrations are found in playing cards that date back to the 15th century, in trade cards with business information used in the 17th century, and in visiting cards that were common during the 18th century. Many of the illustrations that appear in those types of cards have also been found in decorated stationery that was in use years later.

Yet, the formal qualities mentioned above do not suffice to define a postcard. As the first part of its name indicates, 'post' qualifies a type of card: a card intended to be posted, to be sent to someone by mail. In this respect, the closest links to cards-to-post are New Year and Valentine greeting cards sent to families and friends since the 18th century, as well as advertising cards mailed to prospective clients by a wide range of businesses, both of which had a format similar to that of the visiting card.²

The oldest samples found of open cards sent by post were those produced c.1777 by M. Demaison, a French engraver from Paris. These were a variation of visiting cards intended to send greetings but were not commercially successful, probably, "because, not being enclosed under cover, the messages could be read by servants and others through whose hands they passed," as Frank Staff states in *The Picture Postcard and its Origins* (1967, 10). This privacy issue was a concern that preceded, accompanied, followed, and haunted postcards in the process of being officially constituted and used.

By the middle of the 19th century, cards of different shapes and sizes, including some that popped up resembling roses or baskets when opened and others that made into booklets, were profusely used in various countries. These cards, privately produced mainly in Germany, Great Britain, France, and the United States, were commonly utilized to send seasonal and traveling greetings as well as invitations to parties, hunting days, and other gatherings. Nevertheless, these cards were treated as letters when posted as they had to be placed in envelopes and were charged the same mailing rate.

Although very similar to postcards in their use, those cards did not yet enact the state of a postcard, its 'postcardness', that is, its specific condition and qualities. The idea of an open card to write different types of brief messages

2 For a well-documented recount of postcard ancestors, see Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and its Origins*, 1967.

to be sent by mail at a special rate without the need of an envelope was not yet recognized. Almost a century of technical innovations, industrial advancements, transformations in the postal systems, and countless hours of proposals and debates between governments and citizens had to take place in different parts of the world before these small cards came-to-be ‘correspondence cards’ or ‘postal cards’, also known as ‘post cards’ or ‘postcards’, and later nicknamed ‘view cards’ or ‘picture postcards’ in English speaking countries.

Postal Reforms and Open Mailing Cards

The middle of the 19th century was a period of rapid industrial and urban growth, increasing international trade, economic ups and downs, and civil clamoring for social policies that would meet the citizens’ needs. Among the many political topics addressed worldwide, some of the most significant ones were those regarding more efficient mailing systems, cheaper postal rates, and the hope for international agreements that would benefit trade and connections among countries.³ The mail was the main long-distance communication system that acutely influenced and affected government, business, and social issues; nevertheless, it was an expensive and complicated process as it was charged according to distance and its cost had to be paid by the recipient.

In 1840, Great Britain undertook a major postal reform led by Sir Rowland Hill⁴ that, among other changes, incorporated the use of postal stamps and a one-penny unified postage. By making the mail accessible to many, this postal reform implied a significant transformation of the world’s spatial relations as it broadened and democratized long-distance communications. This was an opening for new public communication modes that, as media historian Bernhard Siegert affirmed, “also called for the invention of the postcard” (1999, 115).

3 Being a postmaster then was a well-respected occupation due to the enormous responsibility entailed, comparable today to being Minister/Secretary/Director of Communications or its equivalent that, depending on the country, is part of the president’s cabinet, responsible for policies, innovations, and regulations related to diverse media.

4 Sir Rowland Hill (1795-1876) was an English teacher, inventor, and social leader. See “The Political Economy of Postal Reform in the Victorian Age” by Richard R. John, 2010.

The postal reform unfastened many possibilities of exchange among the common citizens; it was a breaking point for novel government procedures and new ways of people relating to each other. It also implied transforming the postal system into “a media-rational economy, the economy of maximal time utilization” (Siegert 1999, 11) that unleashed crucial alterations in the forms and values of writing and the appraisal of our identity.⁵ The enormous impact of this reform on the common people was recognized by Sir John Henniker-Heaton, a British postal reform advocator of the last decades of the 19th century:

“In 1840 Rowland Hill established Inland Penny Postage, the first great step that was to make the British Post Office the finest in the world. At this distance of time, it is hard to realize what such an innovation meant to the poorer classes, nor how much it did to sweeten and brighten their lives. Sir Rowland’s scheme was opposed by critics prophesizing a loss of revenue, but he lived to see their arguments refuted.” (Porter⁶ 1916, 17)

Some European countries as well as others in other continents –e.g., Brazil issued stamps in August 1843– soon followed the British example, yet some were reticent to the changes. One of the latter to accept them was the United States whose first postal stamp was issued in 1847, seven years after the Rowland Reform, and did not reduce and unify the postage rate until 14 years later, after being persuaded by numerous arguments demonstrating that by making mail available to most everyone, the postal office revenue would increase (U.S. Post Office Department, Division of Philately, 1966).

5 In his analysis of literature and the postal system, Bernhard Siegert states “Once postage stamps, mailboxes, mail slots, and systems-integral postmen had come into existence, what enables the calculation of further communication no longer was an individual, a soul, a person, or a subject. ... This means that our culture switched over to a new logic of identity at the middle of the nineteenth century. Once the name was replaced by an anonymous street number ... and once the body was replaced by the counterrevolutionary, democratizing mail slot, identity no longer was a question of biographical depth but of potential addressability. In the final quarter of the nineteenth century with the lapse of the addressee’s acknowledgment of ‘receipt’ in the delivery of court mandates, such addressability ultimately became synonymous with the legal definition of the person” (1999, 115-116).

6 Sir John Henniker-Heaton’s letters were recollected by his daughter Rose Henniker (Heaton) Porter in 1916.