

VALENTINES

Anne R. Kaplan

Here's to you, my little one!
 The sweetest girlie under the sun.
 If you'll be constant I'll be true —
 I'll leave my happy home for you.

ON a heart-shaped card a naked, neuter cherub raises a glass of champagne in tribute to an unknown sweetheart. This vintage valentine from the 1930s is one of over 1,000 in the Minnesota Historical Society's museum collection. Dating from the early 1800s to the 1970s, the cards offer an intimate glimpse into the lives and social customs of Minnesotans over a significant period of time. They document the changing styles and the enduring message broadcast since the early territorial era. The preservation of these valentines is a significant demonstration of the breadth of the society's holdings.

Variety is the hallmark of the collection. In the 19th century handmade cards were common, but as early as the 1850s lovers were sending commercial cards imported from the East, England, or the continent. The charms of each option are evident, and the choice between them must have been difficult: Who could deny the sentiments expressed in a homemade declaration? Who could resist the lure of an expensive import?

Valentines in the territorial and early statehood period tended to be florid in design if not in verse. Delicate paper doilies, lace, ribbons, and colored cut-outs adorned pastel backings. Locks or braided wreaths of hair added a special touch to some homemade cards. Many were flat and bore simple messages such as "forget me not" or "true love,"

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1910

inked in a careful hand. Others opened out and contained romantic poems or shy declarations. In addition to their central message or motif, many had borders liberally sprinkled with small symbols of the season: cupids, sealed letters, little birds, and hearts.

The manufactured versions of this era were much the same.

I have a message, dear, for you;
 I say it boldly, for it's true:
 One who sent me loves you well! —
 That is what I've come to tell.

A fancy border surrounds two Gainsboroughesque children on this card from the 1880s. The boy strums a mandolin and whispers the verse in his shy maiden's ear. An extended poem inside the card leaves little doubt of the sender's intent, and a bunch of flowers on the back cover underscores his point. More discreet swains could purchase pastoral scenes inscribed "With fond remembrance," or hearts and cupids that proclaimed "I greet thee! My Valentine." And as early as the 1880s valentine postcards, printed by American, English, and German companies, offered another, more casual and light-hearted alternative. These tidy color lithographs were an early precedent for the 20th-century trend to humorous valentines.

Most valentines in the 19th century, however, were serious business. Although it was not uncommon for friends — even of the same sex — to exchange cards, it appears that the majority were declarations of true love, if not marriage proposals. Traditionally they were unsigned, although hand-addressed envelopes and occasional inscriptions ("To a dear friend") must have provided some clues.

The lace and blushes of the 19th century were joined in the 20th by valentines that were elaborate in form, simple and outspoken, if not brazen, in tone. The age of the pop-up and fold-out card had dawned; figures with waving arms and shifting eyes courted under three-dimensional crepe-paper trees. Slogans or puns with appropriate illustrations (such as the 1930s farmer who exclaimed "Ho! Ho! My little Valentine") outnumbered romantic symbols. Kewpie dolls and chil-

1866



1880s



1880s



1920s



1903

1920s or 1930s



dren were pictured above such deathless sentiments as the one adorning a drawing of a Red Cross ambulance: "In an emergency, will you be my Valentine?" Beginning in the 1920s women were depicted as pursuers. This image was not, as might be expected, confined to the flapper. A card from the 1930s, for example, shows a large-eyed girl patting the head of a fuzzy kitten and declaring "If you love me/it's time you said so."

The 1920s and 1930s also saw the advent of the penny awful: a large, colored sheet of low-grade paper bearing an offensive picture and equally unsavory verse:

The Cook

The doctors pay you, I am sure,
To cook the things we can't endure.
Who eats your cooking leaves behind
All future hope for peace of mind.

Apparently such barbs appealed to a wide range of consumers, as the cards attacked people of diverse occupations and stations of life — from wealthy men to women who sewed their own clothing.

Brazen stares, insults, and slogans did not, however, completely replace the homemade or the sentimental cards. In 1913, William Watts Folwell, past president, professor, and librarian at the University of Minnesota, and his wife, Sarah Heywood, received matching, heart-shaped, handmade cards in the university colors of maroon and gold.

To Dr. W. W. Folwell

Hail to thee! the Pioneer,
Who didst guide our early days
Hail to thee! our Prophet-Seer
We still tread the paths you blazed.
We have met to honor thee,
We have come from near and far.
And our songs we raise,
Just to sing thy praise,
Thou art still our Northern Star.

To Mrs. Folwell

Worthy Queen, of worthy mate
Joined with him by a gracious fate
Our fealty we own.
A royal gentleman, well-loved is he
And in our hearts you shall ever be
Linked as one.

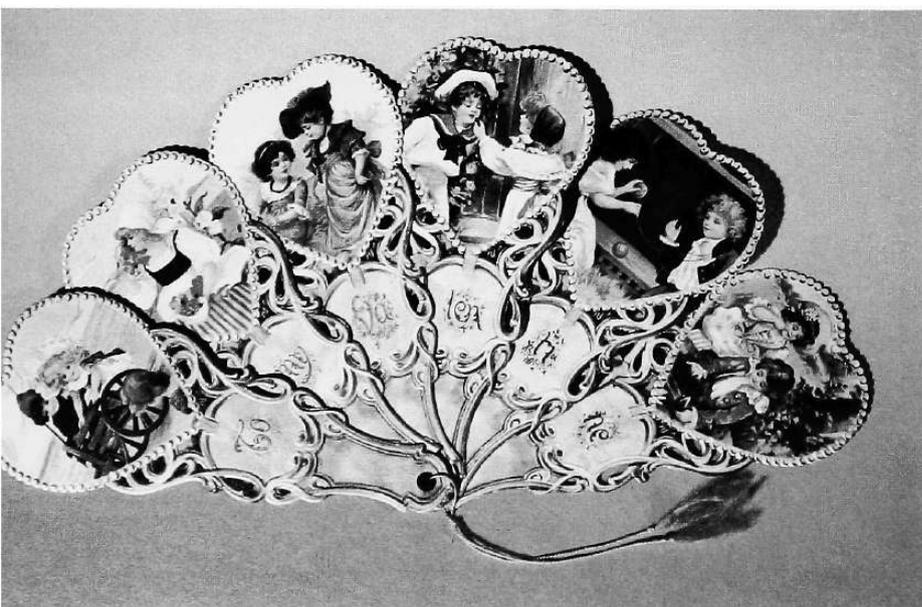


1930s



1970s

1910



Commercial companies also kept up a steady supply of hearts and flowers, as valentines passed from the status of love declaration to greeting card. Special cards for “Mother,” “Sis,” and “Uncle” appeared. Senders began signing their missives. Card exchanging became a February rite — a popularity contest — in the public schools. In 1937, almost a decade after her father’s death, Mary Folwell still received handmade valentines from each grade at Folwell School in Rochester.

The cards kept pace with images and customs of each era. Elegant Victorians, doughboys, flappers, bobby-soxers, and beatniks each took a turn. Activities such as movie-going and auto touring were pictured. One card from the 1940s illustrates the curious blend of gentle sentiment and creative rhyme so common to 20th-century valentines:

By the banks of the Volga
Your name might be Olga
And Ivan Zizitsky be mine;
But although we’re not there
I still truly declare
That you are my sweet Valentine.

While kiddie valentines flooded the market with innocuous slogans and pictures (“I like you, Valentine”) and the romantic-scene and florid-poem cards held their own, a new style of humorous card developed in the 1960s. On one, the sexless cherub of the previous century was replaced by a gender-free being who admitted “Valentine, You May Have Stolen My Heart, But You Ain’t Gettin’ My Navell!” And, as an example of 1970s romance, a knitting dog declaimed from what looks like his living-room chair: “Knit one, purl two, I Love You!”

Clearly a century of social change has left its mark on Cupid. But though style and syntax may have changed over the decades, the rich holdings in the Minnesota Historical Society museum collections affirm that the custom of giving valentines persists, testifying to Minnesotans’ faith that Cupid’s delicate touch will warm the February chill.

COLOR photography by Alan Ominsky.



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