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Hold-to-Light and Other Specialty Postcards

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*P*ostcards, as a form of communication, have been used since the mid-nineteenth century. British artist, Theodore Hook, made and sent the first postcard ever produced to himself. Since that time, postcards have been used by many people as a way to communicate with friends, family, and coworkers, as well as a way for businesses to advertise. The "Hold-to-Light" binder in the David P. Campbell Postcard Collection deals primarily with cards that contain some type of visual effect when viewed. The majority of the cards' visual effects can be viewed when held up a light. For this, they are usually called HTL (hold-to-light) cards, or transparency cards. There were three specific processes used in printing these HTL Cards: Die-cutting, Transparency, and Slide-Transparency.

The first process, die-cutting, is one we see in many of the postcards in this binder. This type of card is produced through layering two sheets of postcard paper and a sheet of colored tissue paper in the middle. A portion of the top layer of postcard paper would be cut away to reveal the colored tissue paper underneath. These sections of the postcard would become illuminated and the color would appear to be more vivid when held to the light. Examples of these can be seen in the St. Louis World's Fair souvenir postcards towards the middle of this binder, as well as many of the hold-to-light cards concentrated toward the front of the binder.

The second process, transparency, can be both more complicated and more simplistic than die-cutting. These cards usually involve a single to several layers of paper and tissue paper to produce the desired effects. The layering usually produces a hidden effect to the card that cannot be seen without hold the card to the light, contrary to die-cut cards. The effects can range from revealing a new or partial image to color changes to scene changes. The cards that have more layers usually involve a color change or a scene change, while the cards with fewer layers usually reveal a new or partial image. Some of the cards in this binder were produced through transparency simply have one layer with the revealed image being printed on the address side of the postcard. Examples of this can be seen in postcards #1 and #2 at the front of the binder. Alternately, some of the cards produced through transparency involve many layers of tissue paper to produce a wide variety of color in the revealed image, as in postcard #54 in the middle of the binder.

The third process, Slide-Transparency, is exactly what the name suggests. It involves layering a slide transparency in between two layers of postcard paper. This would have either involved the slide transparency being directly exposed or able to be viewed through the postcard paper. Photography negatives may have also been used through this process as well. These cards are extremely rare and hard to find. Likely because of this scarcity, these postcards do not appear anywhere in the binder, though one can imagine they look similar to some of the simple die-cut postcards seen throughout the binder.

This binder does contain cards with other interesting visual effects such as copper windows, glow-in-the-dark ink, metallic ink, and embossing. Copper window cards usually have some type of metallic ink printed over the windows to give the effect of sunlight shining of glass. Glow-in-the-dark cards are exactly as the name suggests. The cards glow in the dark when viewed in a dark or dimly lit area. Metallic cards are similar to copper window cards except for the fact that the entire card is printed in metallic ink. Lastly, the embossed cards usually involve some type of imprinted image in the card that is supposed to create an effect of depth or dimension in the image.

The cards contained in the binder are very unique in their visual effects when compared to other cards across this vast collection. Most of these postcards can be viewed by simply holding the card up to a normal light source, however some of them require a stronger source. Some of them cannot be effectively viewed without the use of high-powered industrial light sources. Scans of these postcards along with the image revealed when held to the light can be found on the online repository for the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology in the Dr. David P. Campbell Postcard Collection. The images revealing the visual effect of the cards were produced using photography lights and a custom-built stand, the processes of which has been recorded and uploaded on YouTube.

Data Analysis

This 145 postcard binder, containing such a wide variety of cards through typology and content, could not be fully represented without the use of some statistical analysis. The following graphs are a statistical representation of areas such as location, publisher information, and postcard type. The goal is for this data to reflect on a large scale, the diversity of each postcard individually. The first graph compares the differing types of visual effect cards contained within our binder.

Types of Cards

Other
1.4%
Metallic
2.8%
Copper Window
18.6%

4 2 2

27

110
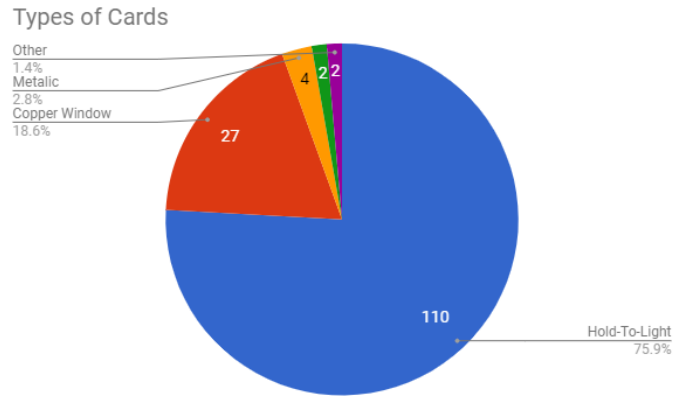
Hold-To-Light
75.9%

The types listed in the graph are Hold-to-Light, Copper Window, Metallic, and Other. These were the largest concentrations we saw in the typology of the cards. The values for each specific type can be seen within the graph itself, as well as percentages. As seen in the graph, the largest group was Hold-to-Light, followed by Copper Window being the second largest.
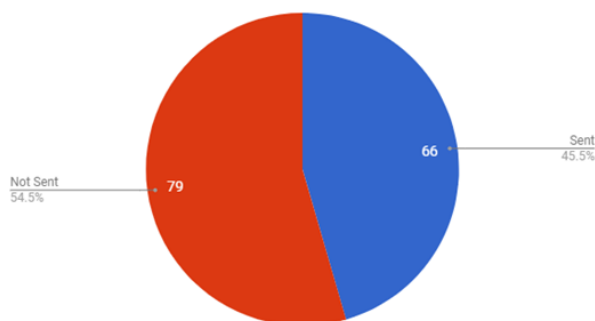
The second graph represents the presence of publication or copyright information printed on the card itself.
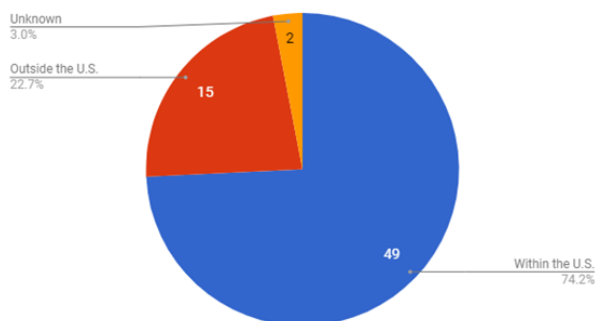
Publication Information

Country of Origin
17.9%

26

74

Publisher
51.0%

No Publisher
31.0%

45
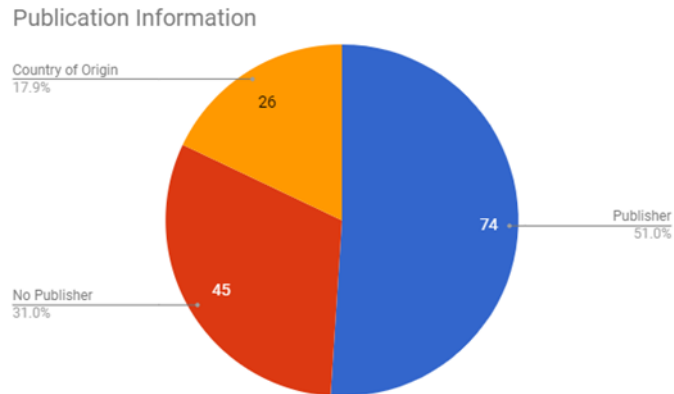
The graph shows that the majority of the cards, a little more than fifty percent, had publication information printed on the card. However, these is a large number of cards that did not have any publication information listed. Some of the cards were missing the direct publication information, but included a country of origin listed on the card. Because these cards were produced at a time that copyright law was less stringent, it can be used as an explanation as to why the publisher was not listed on every card.

The next graphs are all related through postcards sent in our collection, that is, postcards that show physical signs of being processed through a mail system. These indicators are things such as the presence of a stamp and/or a postmark.
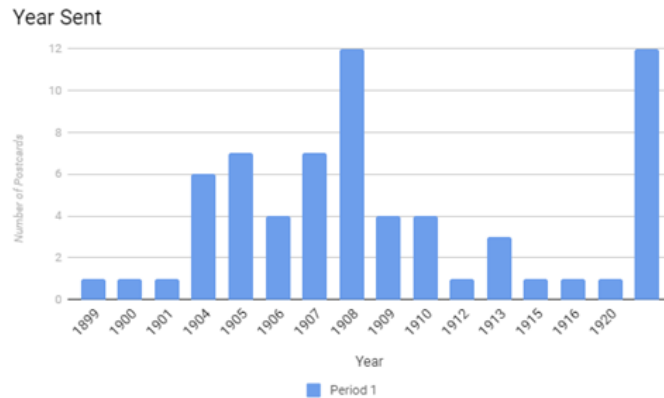
Postcards Sent

Sent
45.5%

66

Not Sent
54.5%

79

Location Sent

Unknown
3.0%

Outside the U.S.
22.7%

2

15

49

Within the U.S.
74.2%

The graphs above show that more postcards in our binder were not sent as opposed to those that were. This is because many of our cards were never even used. However, there are some cards that have messages and addresses on them that were never sent through the mail. One can only wonder why. The lower graph details where the majority of our cards were being sent. The majority were sent and received within the United States, with a small minority of them being sent and received outside of the U.S. Some of the most notable foreign countries the cards were sent from are Germany, England, and Canada.

The final graph that will be included illustrates the very small timeframe in which the postcards within our binder were sent. All of the sent cards are postmarked anywhere between 1899 and 1920. There are a few cards were manufactured in the late 20th century, however, they were never sent.

The graph indicates a strong trend of postcards being sent predominantly between the years 1904 and 1910. It is important to note that this is an observation, and that the observation does not reflect data from other binders. One reason that these cards were so popular within the 1900s and 1910s is that they were a relatively new invention at the time. The hold to light cards and other visual effect cards would have been even more recent than general postcards. This may be why we see the concentration in our data. One particularly high year is 1908, which seem to be right at the middle of our trend. Another particularly high value is the unknown year column on the far right end of the graph. This value represents all of the illegible postmarks encountered in the binder. Our data may have looked completely different with these values included in our graph. This goes to show that while this graph visually represents what is reflected in our binder, there are still unknown aspects and variables that need to be considered when examining the binder as a whole.

Sources

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