It is a great pleasure to witness the boom in the literature enriching our understanding of the relationship between modern art movements and their ephemeral context. As a researcher and librarian, I have long been tracking this phenomenon with great interest. Over the years, I craved both greater analytical depth and a better understanding of the role of the popular arts in fine art practice, but most libraries had little material to support such lines of inquiry. Nowadays, however, each season brings new books and articles to enrich our understanding of the role that the popular paper and the picture press played in art movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Stamp of Fantasy is published in conjunction with a traveling exhibition from the Jeu de Paume, Museum Folkwang Essen, and Fotomuseum Winterthur. The catalog juxtaposes the whimsy of photographic fantasy postcards in the early years of the twentieth century with works by Dada and Surrealist artists, who used postcards, materially or aesthetically, in their work. It includes engaging examples of cards made by artists, such as Hans Bellmer, Erwin Blumenfeld, Marcel Duchamp, Hannah Höch, and El Lissitzky that provide evidence of the interaction between postcard production and avant-garde art movements. The book’s origins are in Clément Cheroux’s Before the Avant-Garde: An Archaeology of Photographic Modernity at the 1999 art fair, Rencontres internationals photographie d’Arles. Most of the fantastical and witty postcards in the catalog and the exhibition are from marvelous collections owned by Peter Weiss and Gerard Levy.

This is the best sort of exhibition document: an exhibition in book form. It has short didactic framework texts, captions on the page, and beautifully designed and paced displays of images, as if on a gallery wall [however, given the span of images, an impressively scaled gallery, indeed]. The works are categorized as Publishers’ Postcards, Studio Postcards, and Amateur Postcards. This beautifully printed, crafted, and designed volume contains a concise and scholarly bibliography, a checklist, and an erudite essay by Clément Cheroux, curator of the photography collection at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. Unlike, Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard by Jeff Rosenheim (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl & Partners 2009), which embraced the vernacular and straightforward popular picture postcards, this collection is emphatically fantastic, playful, and clearly a connoisseur’s selection.

Earlier works documenting postcards with fantastic or surreal content, particularly Angeberpostkarten: 80 Alte Postkarten (Dortmund, Germany: Harenberg, 1979) by Robert Lebeck and Prairie Fires and Paper Moons: The American Photographic Postcard, 1900-1920 by Hal Morgan and Andreas Brown (Boston, MA : D.R. Godine, 1981) brought together cards one might have some hope of finding [then] in a flea market or garage sale, but the postcards in The Stamp of Fantasy are decidedly more unique.

The Stamp of Fantasy provides a nuanced understanding of art of the 1920s and 1930s and will be a great addition to art libraries that serve scholars as well as visual professionals seeking aesthetic surprise and inspiration.

Deirdre Donohue, Stephanie Shuman Librarian, International Center of Photography, ddonohue@icp.org

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